Hand Me Downs

By: Suzume CA

Yamiberry Book I: Azuma Hazuki becomes a student at the St. Spica Academy of Astraea Hill, where with Chikaru's help she must adjust to life without Hatsumi, not to mention life in a world both like and unlike her own. Yamibou/Strawberry Panic crossover.

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DISCLAIMER THE FIRST: I own neither *Yami to Boushi to Hon no Tabibito* nor *Strawberry Panic* . I just think Hazuki and Chikaru are *Awesome* .

DISCLAIMER THE SECOND: This is a direct sequel to the rather unfortunately titled *Red Bows In Her Hair* . I can't promise it will make a lot of sense without having read that story first.

Hand Me Downs

by Suzume CA

So give me hope, give me hope

That emptiness brings fullness

And loss of love brings wholeness

To us all…

-Indigo Girls

Part 1: Spica

Hazuki *hated* the uniform.

The cream-colored coat was classy enough looking, even if it was uncomfortably binding across the chest and would probably attract stains with ridiculous ease, but the *skirt!* She turned away from the mirror and looked over her shoulder to check her reflection. From this angle, she couldn't *quite* see her own underwear, but it was a

close call. Were she to take her hair out of its braid, it would doubtless hang lower than the hemline.

If only Hatsumi, while bringing the collective students of Astraea to greater self-awareness, had managed to convince someone to let the skirts down a little in the process.

She knew, of course, that she should be thankful for the opportunity to wear this uniform at all. Of Astraea's three schools, only Spica had even offered an entrance interview. Miator had flat-out ignored her inquiries, and Lulim, even with its student council president giving a personal recommendation, had been overall unimpressed with her grades and reputation. Even things with Spica had looked dicey until they'd gotten wind of her sudden and inexplicable prowess in athletics, and once the academic interview had segued into a demonstration of her skills with a kendo sword, it had simply been a matter of paperwork.

Shame about the uniform, though. She'd even prefer one of those Miator monstrosities (how did you *breathe* in those things?) to this.

Frowning, Hazuki took one last look at her reflection's several kilometers of exposed leg, then checked her bedside clock. Still thirty minutes until her first dinner as a student of St. Spica's, and she was finding herself at loose ends. She was already finished unpacking (not that it had taken long to fill this dormitory single with the few belongings she'd brought with her), and she didn't feel much like mingling until she absolutely had to. Chikaru had warned her that transfer students were rare at any of the academies, so she would likely be the center of attention at the start.

Instead, she turned her attention once more to the three reminders of the life she'd left behind. Two of these, an ornate antique comb and a polished letter-opener, lay upon her desk. She ran her fingers over them, once again reminding herself that they were real. Here was the last tangible proof that Hatsumi had been a part of her life.

The third, her new sword, was still wrapped up on her bed: she did not know the rules yet on decorating the walls of her room in the Strawberry dorm, and she didn't want to get in trouble on her first day for putting nails into the plaster.

Idly, she unwrapped the hilt of the sheathed weapon, allowing herself a tiny smile as she studied the intricate work. It had been a present from her parents (or at least, they had paid for it) upon her acceptance at St. Spica, and from the crescent-moon pommel to the ornate four-pointed crosspiece, it was a perfect replica of the one she had taken on her journey to find Hatsumi. Chikaru's incredible visual memory and artistic skills had been a great help here, as she had been able to provide the swordsmith with detailed sketches of the custom work to be done.

Of course, Hazuki knew, she had a lot more than merely this for which to thank Chikaru.

Leaving the sword where it was for now, Hazuki again checked her appearance in the mirror (This was the *winter* uniform? Didn't it get… drafty?), then with a long sigh, decided that now would be as good a time as any to make her first appearance in her new home.

After all, she had fought ninjas, samurai, demon beasts and gun-toting spies in her travels. How bad could a room full of students be?

"Good evening, Hazuki-senpai!"

Having arrived comparatively early, Hazuki had taken what she hoped would be an out-of-the-way seat in the dining hall and tried her best to blend in with the surroundings. As the hall began to fill with students, though, she found herself flanked on either side by two familiar girls wearing the pink checkered uniform of St. Lulim.

"Good evening, Kizuna-san, Remon-san," she nodded to each of them in turn, giving the most friendly smile she could manage.

"It's so nice to see you again," Kizuna went on. "Chikaru-sama has been so happy today knowing that you'd be arriving. The happiest we've seen her in a long time, in fact."

"Which is sort of what we wanted to talk to you about, but not quite," Remon nodded.

Hazuki's smile faded into a puzzled frown. "Oh?"

The two girls nodded together, then Kizuna explained. "We think it's wonderful about you and Chikaru-sama."

"Very wonderful. Our onee-sama's happiness is very important to us."

"And we understand that now that you're here, we'll no doubt see a little less of her, and we just wanted you to know that we're okay with that."

"More than okay with that."

"Very much more than okay with that. We're so happy that she finally has someone… you know… *special* ."

"But I--" Hazuki tried to say, but Remon barreled on ahead.

"Even though it's maybe a little weird, seeing as you loved her sister and all."

"But we're not here to pass judgment."

"Not at all. We're sure our onee-sama has good taste, after all."

"And good sense. But that's not what we wanted to talk to you about either."

Bewildered, Hazuki looked from one third-year to the other. "Then what *do* you want to talk to me about?"

"Well," Kizuna said carefully, "we certainly wouldn't want to sound like we were, you know, trying to *scare* you or anything."

"Especially since you could probably cut the both of us up into tiny little pieces. Rumor has it you fought the kendo sensei to a standstill."

"Yeah, so there's no question in our minds that you could, you know, destroy us with a thought. But we still want you to know something important."

"Something *very* important."

"Some good advice for the new girl."

Here, they both leaned in conspiratorially close. Regarding Hazuki from above the rim of her rectangular glasses, Remon whispered "Chikaru-sama is very beloved to all Astraea. But especially to us."

"So if something were to happen to her, like getting her heart broken?"

"It would upset a lot of people."

"Starting with us."

"And while, once again, you're no doubt very mighty…"

"… you may want to think twice before you *ever* do *anything* to hurt our onee-sama."

That said, both girls leaned in, gave a flummoxed Hazuki a kiss on each cheek, said "Welcome to Astraea!" in unison, then scampered off to join Kagome at another table.

"I see you're making friends quickly," another voice came, and Hazuki looked over to see two other girls seating themselves opposite her. The one who had spoken had long, straight black hair and a quirky smile, while the other, younger girl (whose hair actually

appeared to be pink) looked Hazuki over warily. Both wore the uniforms of St. Spica, though the younger of the two had opted for the standard sweater rather than the coat.

"I've actually met both of them before," Hazuki shrugged. "They seem nice enough."

"If a little overprotective," the dark-haired girl grinned. "I'm Yaya, by the way, and this is Tsubomi. Since I don't recognize you, and you look far too old to be a first-year, I'm guessing you're our mysterious kendo-goddess transfer student?"

"Well, I'm your transfer student, at any rate. Azuma Hazuki."

"Glad to meet you," Yaya grinned, though Tsubomi simply nodded, obviously sizing Hazuki up. It didn't take much to see that this girl was very protective of Yaya.

"Likewise," Hazuki replied, "though it seems you all have me at a disadvantage. I'm not used to having a reputation, much less having it precede me."

"Oh, it's only good things," Yaya said with a dismissive wave of the hand. "You know, embarrassing the sensei during your kendo tryouts, making all of Chikaru's fangirls jealous. Congratulations on *that*, by the way!" Here, the other girl actually winked.

Hazuki tried to say something about there being nothing for which to congratulate her, much less to make anyone jealous, but Yaya was already waving two passing Miator students over. "Nagisa! Tamao! Come meet the new girl!"

"Actually, I believe we've already met," the darker-haired of the two Miator girls smiled, taking the chair to Hazuki's right. "Azuma-san, right?"

"Nice to see you again, Suzumi-san," Hazuki nodded.

"Oh, you can call me Tamao. And you remember Nagisa-chan, of course?"

"Of course," Hazuki smiled, looking to her left to see that the young lady in question had taken the neighboring seat. "You made… quite an impression."

"She does that," Tamao smirked.

"Hush, Tamao-chan," Nagisa retorted, giving Hazuki a weak smile. Hazuki could tell right away that something was wrong, as Nagisa looked nothing like the happy, bubbly girl she'd met during her first trip to Astraea Hill.

It was then that Hazuki noted the absence of Shizuma, Nagisa's silver-haired love. She wondered briefly if something had happened between the two, but then she remembered that Shizuma had been a sixth-year, and would thus have graduated at the end of the previous term. Suddenly the pensive expression on the normally perky redhead's face made a lot more sense.

"So, tell us," Yaya went on, leaning across the table and grinning. "How badly *did* you spank the sensei? Talk about someone who had it coming."

"It was… a good match," Hazuki shrugged. "We sparred for a few minutes, that's all."

If anything, Yaya's grin deepened. "That's not the way I hear it. I hear you had her breaking out every trick she had just to keep up with you."

Hazuki shook her head, but before she could say anything, a hand appeared on her shoulder, and a smooth voice came from behind. "Well, what have we here? You must be the new girl."

The reaction from her companions was instantaneous: Yaya's face darkened, and she gazed up at the newcomer with just short of open

hostility. Tsubomi looked nervous and uncomfortable, but her focus seemed to be on Yaya: she looked ready to restrain the dark-haired girl at a moment's notice. Tamao and Nagisa quickly exchanged glances, then turned worried eyes on Yaya as well.

"Azuma Hazuki, I believe it is? My name is Kenjyo Kaname, Student Council President of St. Spica."

The practiced, silky tones of her voice were enough to set Hazuki's nerves on edge even without taking into account the reactions of the other four. Nevertheless, she pushed back the chair slightly, then stood and turned to face this Kaname. The president turned out to be a very tall, slender woman (almost as tall as Hazuki herself) with short black hair and a wide, thin-lipped smile. The smile flickered for an instant as Hazuki stood to her full height, but soon returned.

"My duty to you, President Kenjyo-sama," Hazuki said, bowing her head slightly.

Looking amused at the choice of words, Kaname took a step back and raked Hazuki up and down with her eyes. "You're out of uniform," she said with an exaggerated frown, indicating Hazuki's bandaged left calf. "And on your first day, no less."

"I have shin splints," Hazuki lied automatically, not wishing to discuss the true reason for the bandages with this woman.

"Hmm, that's too bad. Perhaps you're not as… *conditioned* an athlete as I've been led to believe?"

"I can hold my own."

Smile widening into a smirk, Kaname brought a hand up to tuck a loose strand of hair behind Hazuki's ear before running a long finger along her clenched jaw. "So. You're the one who finally coaxed Minamoto out of her closet, eh? I thought I'd never see the day."

"With respect," Hazuki replied in a steady, edged voice, "my relationship with Minamoto-sama is none of your concern, and I would ask that President Kenjyo-sama *never* touch me like that again."

With that, every conversation in the room seemed to go silent at once, and Hazuki was vaguely aware that she had become the center of attention already, just as Chikaru had warned.

While Kaname's smile did not fade, something began to smolder in her eyes. "You're a feisty one. Am I going to have to break you in a little, Azuma?"

Hazuki returned her gaze, fire for fire. "I believe President Kenjyo-sama would deeply regret the attempt."

"That's enough," came a new voice: one which somehow managed to be shaky and firm at the same time. From the corner of her eye (as she would not look away from Kaname), Hazuki noticed another Spican girl, this one a foot shorter than either of them, with long curls of blonde hair and bright blue eyes. There was a sort of nervous authority in the way she held herself, as though she were doing her duty in spite of being frightened to death. "Kenjyo-san, the sister will be here soon. Please come to the head table."

Kaname stared at Hazuki for a few moments more, her smile making it clear that this was far from over, then finally broke eye contact. "Of course, Etoile-sama," she said to the fair-haired girl, her voice and bearing suddenly the very picture of nonchalance. The young Etoile nodded to Hazuki almost apologetically before leading the council president away.

Doing her best to ignore the stares of her new schoolmates, Hazuki once again took her seat. She glanced toward the head table to see that Chikaru had arrived somewhere in the midst of all of this, and was gazing at her with a mix of concern and humor. Hazuki nodded back to her, unable to keep a tiny smile from alighting on her face.

As the murmur of conversation gradually returned to the dining hall, Yaya reached across the table and gripped Hazuki's hand. "So. You and I? We're going to be *great* friends."

"It seems like everyone in the dormitory thinks you and I are lovers."

"Well, we *are* in bed together again."

Hazuki gave a single snort of laughter. "With our clothes on."

"True," Chikaru admitted, "but it's close enough for the rumor mill."

Hazuki smiled in spite of herself. For that matter, the two of them were *lying* close enough for the rumor mill, caught somewhere between cuddling and spooning. Chikaru was hugging her from behind, their joined hands firmly clasped over Hazuki's chest, the *Souma* flowing lazily through this connection.

"Are you going to be okay with that?" Chikaru asked, an uncharacteristic note of uncertainty in her voice.

"With what?"

"With… *not* being lovers?"

Hazuki turned to look over her shoulder, finding Chikaru's brown eyes studying her. "Of course I am. We've talked about this. Nothing's changed, I promise."

"I don't want you to get hurt," Chikaru whispered. "I'm an affectionate person by nature, but I don't want this… *closeness* to feel like I'm leading you on."

"This doesn't hurt me," Hazuki insisted, squeezing their joined hands. "Far from it. I'm not in a place where I need more than this, I promise. And I wouldn't ask that of you anyway. I know better."

Chikaru sighed and snuggled closer. "Sometimes it feels like it would be easier to just give in to destiny and be lovers after all."

"After everything you've done for me, the last thing I'd *ever* do is ask you to be something you're not."

"I know. But my goodness, considering how the *Souma* feels when we're just holding hands, I bet the sex would be spectacular…"

There was a long pause, and then Chikaru added "That's not helping, is it?"

Hazuki laboriously turned herself over to face Chikaru, then scooted in so that their foreheads were touching. "I'm very happy with what we have."

"Me, too. Whatever it is."

"Whatever it is, yes. It almost feels like having a sister again, only without the wracking guilt."

"And without the forbidden attraction?"

"I wouldn't go *that* far," Hazuki smirked, rolling her eyes. "I seem to be cursed with ridiculously beautiful pseudo-sisters who are off-limits for one reason or another. But it's not the same this time, I promise."

Chikaru gave a small lopsided smile at this. "It would break my heart if you came all the way back to this world just to go through what you did with Hatsumi all over again."

"I hope I've learned a thing or two since then, like enjoying what you have for what it is. I only wonder what I did to deserve having someone like you in my life."

"Something terrible, no doubt," Chikaru grinned.

"And anyway, it's *your* reputation being affected by the time we spend together."

"I think I can handle that," Chikaru giggled. "And I'm not the only one with a reputation, O sword goddess who coaxed the most notoriously single girl on the hill out of her closet."

Hazuki rolled onto her back, letting out a sigh. "Ah, yes. Heard that, did you?"

"Mmm hmm."

"So that's my student council president, eh?"

"I'm afraid so."

"What's her story?"

Chikaru settled onto her back to mirror Hazuki. "The stereotypical Alpha Female making the best of what she no doubt considers an untenable situation. She wanted to be Etoile, but had to settle for council president, and let me assure you that she'll use her rank for every advantage, even if it's not the rank she wanted. Admired by many for her athleticism and striking good looks. Now along comes a willful transfer student possessing the same qualities -- not to mention an annoying refusal to roll over at her command -- and her position is immediately threatened."

"I don't *want* her position," Hazuki scowled.

"Irrelevant, I'm afraid. Intimidation is part of her game, and you just showed her up in front of the entire population of the dormitory. This isn't like standing up to a bully and making her back down, Hazuki-chan. She's going to keep trying to goad you into something."

"Fine. If she touches me like that again, I'll break her fingers."

"At which point you'll be out of this school faster than you can blink, and her position as Alpha will be secure. She'll use anything she can to get rid of a potential rival, and you mustn't allow it."

Hazuki let out a noisy breath. "You're right."

"There's… more that you should know," Chikaru went on, again sounding uncharacteristically hesitant. "I almost don't want to tell you this, because I know how protective you are, but I think it's better you hear it from me."

"What is it?" Hazuki asked.

"You asked me once if Naoko -- I mean, Hatsumi --"

"You can call her Naoko to me," Hazuki interrupted. "I know we're talking about the same person."

Chikaru smiled. "Of course. But you asked me once if she had… suitors?"

Hazuki narrowed her eyes, then widened them as the light dawned. "Kenjyo?"

"Wanted her, yes," Chikaru nodded. "But it was different with her. Everyone was drawn to Naoko: how could you not be? But Kaname-san was… clear in her intentions. To her, Naoko would have been the ultimate prize. She would have put our angel in a cage if she'd had her way."

"Don't forget," Hazuki sighed, huskily, "I wanted Hatsumi all to myself as well."

"Mmm, different. I think you needed her full attention to help you come to terms with yourself. There's no doubt in my heart that you loved her." Here, Chikaru gripped Hazuki's hand, sending a surge of energy. "You don't feel *anything* like Kaname-san, believe me, *particularly* since you came back. You find strength in love, and she finds it in conquest. She's a hunter, and she's very comfortable being that."

"How did Naoko react to her?"

Chikaru shifted uncomfortably. "Naoko was nothing but kindness, like always, but she rejected Kaname's advances as much as she did anyone's. Eventually, just a few weeks before Naoko left us, Kaname… forced a kiss from her, right in the dining hall before breakfast. But then, the strangest thing happened. She backed away in tears, and fled from the room. No one saw her for two days afterward, and when she did show her face, she was very quiet and reserved."

"What happened to her?"

"Naoko wouldn't tell me, but… privately, I think Kaname got a glimpse of what she was becoming, and it terrified her. Unfortunately, it didn't last. In a few weeks, Naoko was gone, and she began reverting to her hunter's ways… starting with me."

Hazuki took a sharp breath, her free hand reaching for a sword that wasn't there. "What did she do to you?"

"There, you see? This is why I was hesitant," Chikaru laughed. "I don't want to rile up my samurai protector any more than I have to."

"Did she hurt you?"

"Not in any way," Chikaru assured her. "If anything, I frustrated the fire right out of her. *She* wanted to be the one to drag me out of that closet, and for some inexplicable reason, her advances had no effect on me. And now she thinks that you're the one to have succeeded where she failed."

"Lovely. I don't suppose just… *telling* people that we're not lovers would convince them?"

"Doubtful. She's going to ride you hard, Hazuki-chan, make no mistake. You're new, you've demonstrated yourself to be defiant, and she thinks that you took one of the prizes she could never have." Chikaru's expression twisted into a teasing grin. "And you have a much nicer body than she does."

"Good to know," Hazuki sighed, rolling her eyes again.

"I'm so sorry I wasn't able to get you into St. Lulim."

"It's not your fault. We can blame my predecessor for that."

After a pause, Chikaru turned her face to Hazuki, a frown crossing her features. "You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Every time that subject comes up, your energy retreats."

Hazuki squeezed Chikaru's hand, willing the *Souma* to resume its course. "I'm sorry. It's still… not the most comfortable thing to think about." Hazuki was still coming to terms with the idea that she had essentially taken the place of the Hazuki native to this world, and still held the memories of this miserable, lonely girl. Not the least of which being the memory of her death.

"You can tell me anything," Chikaru reminded her.

"And I will," Hazuki nodded. "My head's still pretty crowded right now, but I'll tell you all about it once I know where to start."

"I'll hold you to that, you know."

Again, Hazuki couldn't help but smile. "Please do."

Once finished brushing her teeth, Tamao emerged from the bathroom of their dormitory and padded to her bed. Nagisa had been quiet all evening, so once again Tamao found herself trying to fill the empty space with conversation. "The evening meal was certainly eventful," she said. "Almost as memorable as *your* first, Nagisa-chan."

Nagisa did not answer. She simply sat on her bed, knees held against her chest, looking forlornly into space.

"Another transfer student making a grand first impression," Tamao went on, pulling back her covers. "Not unlike someone else I know."

Still, Nagisa did not speak, or indeed even acknowledge that she had heard.

Tamao stifled a quiet sigh. "Nagisa-chan, please talk to me."

Whether or not it had been the pleading note in Tamao's voice, Nagisa did finally react, turning tired, sorrowful eyes on her friend. "I'm sorry, Tamao-chan."

"I know it's difficult, being back here without her," Tamao said delicately, "but you'll see her again soon, right?"

"Three weeks," Nagisa nodded.

"Well," Tamao smiled brightly, "it's then my duty, as your best friend, to watch over you very closely and make sure no one tries to tempt you away from her during that time." Tamao was all too aware of the irony of this statement, but she was willing to say anything at this point if it would make her Nagisa-chan smile.

"Tamao-chan?" Nagisa replied, her voice barely more than a whisper.

"Yes, Nagisa-chan?"

Nagisa bit her lower lip for a moment, then the words came in a rush. "Could I sleep with you tonight? I've just gotten used to being near someone when I sleep, and I thought I was ready for how hard this was going to be, but I didn't know it was possible to feel this lonely, and I know I have no right at all to ask you for this, but…"

A great many thoughts flooded Tamao as Nagisa broke off, and to her own disquiet, several of them were quite bitter. Part of her wanted to tell Nagisa that she was all too aware of how loneliness felt, and had years of experience she could share if necessary. Part

of her wanted to tell Nagisa that no, she certainly had no right to ask this of her, and that the last thing she wanted to be was a poor substitute for the one Nagisa *truly* wanted to be with. Part of her wanted to tell Nagisa how torturous it was going to be, by the looks of things, to spend the entire year looking into those sad eyes and knowing that she could do nothing to bring back that smile she loved so much.

But those were parts that Tamao could live with. Instead of giving voice to any of these, she climbed into her bed, scooted toward the wall, and held the covers back for her friend. Wordlessly, Nagisa crossed the room and settled beside her. Tamao reached over her to switch off the bedside lamp, and only when they were both lying in darkness did Nagisa speak. "Thank you, Tamao-chan."

"Anything for my Nagisa-chan," Tamao whispered, forcing a smile.

"You're very good to me," Nagisa mumbled, suddenly on the verge of sleep.

"You deserve it." And really, that was the simple truth of it.

Tamao waited until Nagisa's breathing settled into the heaviness of sleep, then finally closed her eyes. *Shizuma-sama,* she thought to herself, *wherever you are, I hope you never let a day pass without thinking of how lucky you are* . The thought brought a more genuine smile to her face. In the months of adjusting to the new dynamic between the three of them, she could now almost think such things without the accompanying feelings of crushing regret.

At that moment, Nagisa stirred and threw one arm across Tamao's middle, snuggling up beside her in the process.

Almost.

Next: Phoenix

Phoenix

Kneeling down with broken prayers

Hearts and bones from days of youth

Restless with an angel's wing

I dig a grave to bury you

-Indigo Girls

I was reborn before all life could die

The phoenix bird will leave this world to fly

If the phoenix bird can fly then so can I

-Elton John

Part 2: Phoenix

Late Saturday morning found Yaya wandering the hill, trying desperately to escape the boredom of her newly single-occupancy dormitory room. With only one week of classes complete, the homework load was still light, so she felt justified in getting out and enjoying the good weather without fear of falling behind. Plenty of time for that annual activity later.

To her surprise, she saw a sprinkling of about a dozen girls in the metal bleachers around the soccer field. There weren't any scheduled team practices yet as far as she knew (at least she hoped not), but they were definitely watching something. Curious, she

headed over to investigate, smiling as she recognized a familiar head of blonde hair amongst the onlookers.

"Good morning, Etoile-sama," she grinned as she seated herself beside her old friend.

Hikari was momentarily startled by her appearance, but smiled once she recognized her. "Yaya-chan, you don't have to call me that."

"Why not, Etoile-sama?" Yaya smirked, enjoying Hikari's discomfort at the title. "So what are we watching?"

"Azuma-san is practicing," Hikari replied, pointing toward the center of the field. Sure enough, there was the new girl, dressed in a simple tank top and shorts, going through a series of katas.

Yaya caught the glimmer of steel as Hazuki whirled her weapon into a defensive position. "Is she using a real sword?"

"Yes. I may need to talk to her about that: I'm not sure it's allowed."

Nodding, Yaya scoped out the rest of the crowd. While nowhere near the fawning hordes that usually greeted Amane at the equestrian range, they were certainly watching attentively. She grinned as she caught sight of Chikaru, standing near a handmade sign reading "Action Photography Club," instructing her usual three in the use of some complicated-looking lens attachments.

"There are a few other things I should talk to her about as well," Hikari went on. "I'm worried that she's not adjusting well."

"Etoile-sama's work is *never* done," Yaya sighed dramatically.

To Yaya's complete surprise, Hikari reached over and lightly punched her on the shoulder. "Be serious, Yaya-chan. I've heard that she never spends time getting to know the other girls. No one ever sees her except in passing, and she always keeps to herself at meals."

"It's only been a week, Hikari-chan. Think about it: Chikaru's been single as long as anyone's known her, and she's probably making up for lost time. I'm surprised she lets Hazuki out of her bed!"

"Yaya-chan!"

"You were thinking it, admit it."

Hikari blushed and looked at the distant figure on the field. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Yaya chuckled, but the more she thought about it, the more she wondered. She certainly hadn't exchanged more than a few words with Hazuki since that first meal (though Tsubomi's seeming unease with the new girl might have had something to do with that), even after having thoroughly enjoyed that brilliant beat-down of their new council president.

Realization hit. "Oh. Do you think it has something to do with Kaname?"

"It might," Hikari shrugged. "Kenjyo-san is very popular with most of the students of St. Spica."

"Only because they don't know her like we do," Yaya grumbled.

"I've actually heard a few people say that they're kind of *afraid* of Azuma-san after that incident at the first dinner," Hikari went on, "so I think, *as Etoile*, that I should get to know her a little better and see if I can help her."

Yaya laughed at the almost sarcastic emphasis Hikari placed on the title, but her good humor faded as she chanced a glance to one side and saw a familiar tall figure in a tennis dress approaching the field. "Oh, hell. Here comes trouble."

"Azuma-san!"

Hazuki continued into the next stance as though she hadn't heard, catching the unsharpened side of the blade in her left hand and kneeling to block an imaginary blow. *Nicely timed*, she smiled to herself, considering the source of the voice.

"Azuma-san!"

Letting out a silent sigh, Hazuki stood to her full height and turned toward the voice. "President Kenjyo-sama," she nodded.

"Do you play tennis, Azuma-san?" Kaname called.

"Not if I can avoid it."

Kaname gave her that same thin-lipped smile. "Then it's time you started. Come play a match with me."

"With respect," Hazuki replied, sheathing her sword deliberately, "I'm practicing right now."

"It's not a request, Azuma."

The few murmuring voices in the stands went quiet. Hazuki actually smiled at this: Astraea certainly had its share of dramatic silences. She faced off with her council president for a few seconds more, then nodded. "One game."

"That should be sufficient," Kaname nodded in reply.

Ten minutes later, Kaname strode onto the court, noting with satisfaction the dense crowd already gathered outside the chain-link fence. The rumor mill was so easy sometimes: just a few comments to wide-eyed second- and third-years about challenging the new girl to a match, and scores of onlookers were already there to see. And the larger the audience, the better.

To her surprise, Azuma was already there: she had not changed from her previous outfit, and she was still holding that damned sword.

Pitching her voice loudly enough to be heard by all, Kaname said "Lesson number one about tennis, Azuma-san: you use a *racquet* ."

"I don't own a racquet," the new girl replied, simply.

Sighing melodramatically, Kaname opened her tote bag and removed both of hers. "Then you'll have to borrow my spare. Mind that you're careful with it?"

"Of course," Azuma nodded, meeting her at the net to accept the offered racquet. She then brought her sword to Minamoto, who was standing near the gate with those ridiculous proteges of hers. The Lulim president leaned in to whisper something to her, but Kaname looked away before she'd have to see them kiss.

Instead, she went back to her bag, opened a new packet of balls, slipped one into her skirt pocket, then gave another a few experimental bounces on the surface of the court. By the time she returned to her place for her opening serve, Azuma was crouched at the center line, racquet held in both hands.

"So tell me, Azuma," Kaname called, though she reined in the volume a bit, "how *does* one go from being a cripple to an Olympic hopeful in three short months?"

She timed the strike of her serve to come right after those last words. The ball flew in just inside the line and blew past Azuma, who literally did not even make an attempt at it.

"Fifteen-love. Shin splints bothering you?" she smirked as Azuma picked up the ball and tossed it back over the net.

"My shin splints are fine. And kendo isn't an Olympic sport."

"No, but I've heard whispers about asking you to try out for the national volleyball team. Quite impressive for someone who couldn't walk without a pair of canes as recently as December." Again, she timed her serve to come right at the end of her sentence. This time, Azuma made an effort, but the ball hit the edge of her racquet and went into the fence.

"Thirty-love," Kaname scoffed. "Is this the best I'm going to get from you, Miracle Cure? I expected more."

Azuma's face remained a curious mix of stormy and placid as she threw back the ball. "Lesson number one: take the measure of your opponent."

"No, I already know that lesson, thank you. I've been doing some reading, Azuma. A lot of words like 'medical miracle' and 'unprecedented recovery.' So what's your secret? Did you just get tired of being pathetic, or was it never as bad as all that after all?"

With that, she launched her third serve. This time, though, Azuma took three long strides to intercept it and returned it with a two-handed stroke, sending it streaking directly toward Kaname's face. She instinctively brought her racquet up to shield herself, and the ball smacked off of it and spun crazily out of bounds.

Hands buzzing from the unexpectedly hard impact, Kaname looked across the court to see Azuma standing back at the center line, her face unreadable. "I believe that point is mine, President Kenjyo-sama."

"Thirty-fifteen," Kaname nodded, taking a few extra seconds while retrieving the ball to allow her hammering heart to slow. "That was a powerful shot."

"Thank you. I think my aim needs work."

"You do realize it would have been out of bounds if I hadn't blocked it?"

"I told you I don't play tennis."

Determined to get back to the offensive, Kaname forced a smile. "Still, that's impressive from someone who used to be a withered husk of a girl. So again, what's your secret? How do you become that much stronger, and apparently *taller*, in such a short time? Did you have… help?"

She put all her force into the serve, only to again see it returned, and again, right toward her eyes. For the second time, she brought up her racquet by reflex, but this time the ball bounced up about thirty feet before landing shy of the net.

"I was extensively drug-tested prior to my transfer to St. Spica, if that's what President Kenjyo-sama is trying to imply," Azuma replied, steadily. "And I believe that point is *also* mine."

Kaname stared across the court as the ball slowly bounced toward the fence. The crowd was buzzing, but not in the way she'd hoped, and to her annoyance, she was not getting the reaction she'd wanted from Azuma. Obviously this one was going to be a tough nut to crack.

"So how *do* you account for it?" she shot back, retrieving the ball and returning to the back line. "A miracle?"

For the first time, Azuma's expression changed. To a smile. "Maybe I was touched by an angel?"

"Thirty-all," Kaname called, then intentionally raised her voice above crowd level as she prepared her next serve. "So if you're walking with angels, Azuma, how do you account for the suicide note they found at your old school?"

The smile dropped as Azuma whirled into a forehand volley that yet again shot the ball straight at her opponent. This time, Kaname had the presence of mind to duck, though she heard the ball whizz very close to her ear as she twisted out of its way. As she regained her

balance, she looked behind her to see that the ball was embedded between the links of the still-vibrating fence. A look across the court showed Azuma back at the center line, but this time her face was a thunderous scowl.

Much better.

"Forty-thirty," Kaname nodded, taking the spare ball from her skirt pocket. "Game point. You're all power and no finesse, Azuma. That's not going to get you anywhere!" Hoping to press her advantage, she fired another serve before her opponent could get a word in.

To her surprise, Azuma was practically into her backswing before Kaname actually served. Once across the net, ball met racquet in a blur of two-handed uppercut, and to Kaname's continued shock, the hapless yellow projectile soared clear out of the court and possibly out of the campus grounds, still in its upward arc when it disappeared from view.

She watched it go, mouth hanging open for several seconds before she caught herself, and when she turned back, Azuma was standing at the net, extending the borrowed racquet handle-first. "Your game, President Kenjyo-sama," the girl said, her face once again impassive.

All too aware of the hush that had settled over the crowd, Kaname stepped to the net and took back her spare.

"Thank you," Azuma continued, her eyes flashing in spite of her polite words. "That was very educational."

"You don't want me as an enemy, Azuma," Kaname said, making sure her voice was too quiet to be heard outside the court.

Azuma shook her head, the smallest traces of a smile on her lips as she answered in like voice. "I don't *want* you *at all* ."

Someone in the crowd had the presence of mind to start applauding, and soon several other sets of hands joined in. Azuma bowed slightly to the victor, then strode toward the exit, Minamoto meeting her there with a troubled expression and an arm around the waist.

While that had not gone as well as she had wanted, Kaname had to admit that the game had been very educational indeed. Perhaps it was simply time to adjust her tactics.

"Advantage, Kenjyo," she muttered to herself as she followed Azuma off the court.

Hazuki and Chikaru did not speak until they were well into the forest. Kizuna and Remon had initially wanted to follow, but Kagome, of all people, held them back, and once again Chikaru found herself grateful for the young one's observational skills. Hazuki was keeping her composure for the time being, but Chikaru could tell how close her dear friend was to erupting, and it would be best if she did not have an audience.

She led them to Naoko's tree (as she liked to call it), hoping that this spot, and the energy she fancied it still held, would soothe Hazuki's agitation.

"Do you need to be alone for a while?" she asked, as Hazuki placed both hands against the trunk and pressed her forehead into the rough bark.

"Please don't go," Hazuki whispered. "Alone is the last thing I need to be right now."

Chikaru leaned Hazuki's sword against a neighboring tree and slowly approached the now-shaking girl. Carefully, she laid her hand on one of Hazuki's shoulders, and was momentarily stunned by the sensation. Hazuki's *Souma* was drawn in, focused into a pinpoint of green fire somewhere behind her eyes. Chikaru let her own flow into the empty spaces, trying to bring her samurai out of wherever she'd

taken herself. "She's not here, Hazuki-chan. I don't know how she knew those things about you, but I won't…"

"It's public record," Hazuki interrupted. "Everything she said is out there for anyone to find."

"Including… the note?"

Hazuki slowly pushed herself away from the tree. She nodded, but did not meet Chikaru's eyes. "It was because I was on my way here when they found the note, and there was a police search when they couldn't find me at my house. There was no way to cover it up or sweep it away."

"What do you mean?"

Still without making eye contact, Hazuki crossed her arms and went on, her voice still a cracked whisper. "The night I… arrived, the last night I had with Hatsumi, she took the *Souma* from me before she left. I couldn't remember my old life anymore: I woke up thinking I was the Azuma Hazuki of *this* world. But she didn't leave me all of my other self's memories either, probably to spare my feelings. I didn't know that I had left a suicide note at school, in a place where it wouldn't be found until that morning. But by the time it turned up, I… was coming here to find you. Hatsumi had left me a clue, and she must have also left me just enough memory to find her other sister in this world, so I was already gone."

"I remember," Chikaru smiled, having heard some of this story before.

"I'm sorry you had to hear this from *her* . I should have told you sooner."

"That your previous self had suicidal thoughts?"

Hazuki gave a short bark of humorless laughter, then finally turned to meet Chikaru's eyes. "No, not just thoughts. I… followed through. I

killed myself."

"It wasn't you," Chikaru said immediately, though her blood ran cold at the admission.

Hazuki shook her head violently, pulling away from Chikaru and breaking the connection. When her voice came again, it was thick and tremulous. "No, that's just it: it *was* me. I have *all* of those memories, and if I'm not careful, I still feel them all. I lived a miserable life here, Chikaru. Always sick, barely able to walk on my *best* days, quietly put on one round of psychotropics after another to my parents' eternal shame… it's all there! Every bit of it, up to that last hopeless night, when I came home from leaving that note and took a handful of my sleep meds. I *died* that night, and now that those memories have returned, I can still remember my thoughts fading one by one, and how *glad* I was to feel it happening."

"But you woke up," Chikaru reminded her.

"Yes. I woke up strong and tall and confused, and after seeing those strawberries she'd left for me, all I knew was that I had to come here. So I wasn't there when the note was found, and I wasn't there when my parents were called in from their business trip, and I wasn't there when the police found the empty pill bottle under the edge of my bed. I came back home after seeing you to find an investigation still going on at the house."

"Your parents must have been happy to see you."

Hazuki smiled grimly. "That's another irony. *My* parents will never see me again. That's the price for my coming here. My *real* parents lost *both* of their daughters… and they'll *never* know what happened to us."

"I'm sorry," Chikaru whispered. Truth be told, she had wondered about this.

"And my other parents? My… *local* parents? They were relieved to see me at first, but once they saw how… healthy I was, it didn't take long for the shame to come back." She brought furious, tearful eyes back to Chikaru as she said this. "They thought I was acting out. They thought it was all just to get attention. Poor little Hazuki just wanted someone to notice her. They had *no* idea what they'd done to me… what their… *success* had cost their wretched, lonely *shell* of a daughter! They'll *never* understand what they drove me to!"

"Hazuki," Chikaru said, deliberately grasping both of her hands to restore the connection of their *Souma*, "you keep saying 'I,' and 'me,' but you're not her anymore. She's been *reborn* ."

"I…" Hazuki began, but her voice was choked out by her tears.

"You're a phoenix," Chikaru insisted, slipping her arms around the other girl and holding her tightly. "Fiery and new and stronger than ever before. This is your second chance, Hazuki. And maybe this is *her* second chance, too."

Hazuki buried her face in Chikaru's hair and shook with the force of her sobs. Chikaru eased them down to the soft earthen floor at the foot of Naoko's tree, and just held her.

Taking care not to make a sound (though neither Chikaru nor Hazuki were likely to notice her in their present state), Hikari slipped away from the edge of the clearing and retreated toward the dormitory, her head spinning with confusion.

Next: Connection

Connection

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Be warned: This is a Talking Chapter. Thanks to Ninemil as always, but specifically this time for clarification on honorifics and manners. (I will try to be less of an ugly American, but hey, years of practice!)

Maybe there's no haven in this world for tender age

My heart beat like the wings of wild birds in a cage

My greatest hope, my greatest cause to grieve

And my heart flew from its cage, and it bled upon my sleeve

-Indigo Girls

Part 3: Connection

"But that's an *irregular* verb," Nagisa said carefully, "so it won't conjugate the same."

"Very good, Nagisa-chan," Tamao grinned across the table.

"How many French verbs *are* irregular, anyway?"

"Entirely too many. More to memorize, I'm afraid."

Nagisa sighed and set her book aside. The student lounge on a Sunday afternoon was no time for academics. "Can we take a break, Tamao-chan? My head's full."

"Of course," Tamao smiled indulgently. "You're all but caught up anyway."

"And it only took me all of last year," Nagisa grumbled.

Tamao took a sip of her tea. "I'm very proud of my Nagisa-chan. All your extra work with Shizuma-sama has done you a world of good."

Even though Nagisa knew that Tamao was trying to encourage her, she still flinched inwardly at the mention of Shizuma's name. By the look on Tamao's face, though, it hadn't just been inward. "Nagisa-chan," her friend said softly, extending one hand across the table to lay over hers, "I'm sorry. But it's getting to where I can't even say her name without making you sad."

"I know," Nagisa whispered. "I'll do better. It's just…"

"… hard being away from her," Tamao nodded. "I know. But…"

"Excuse me," a soft voice interrupted.

Nagisa and Tamao looked up to see the tall, dark-haired form of Azuma Hazuki standing at their table, a steaming mug in her hand. Nagisa quickly searched her mind for something to say, but Tamao beat her to it. "Good day, Azuma-san."

Hazuki gave them a wry smile. "President Kenjyo-sama calls me Azuma-san. Please, call me Hazuki. May I join you?"

Nagisa shot Tamao a nervous look, but Tamao was already scooting over. "Please do, Hazuki-san."

"Thank you," Hazuki nodded, taking the seat vacated by Tamao. "I spoke with Etoile-sama this morning after Mass, and she… *encouraged* me to start getting to know everyone a little better. I thought I might start with the ones I've already met?"

"Sounds nice," Nagisa smiled, hoping that she looked convincing enough. The tale of yesterday's tennis match had spread quickly, and she was more than a little nervous to be in the Spican's company after everything she'd heard.

Hazuki smiled awkwardly, as though not used to doing so. "So! How's Hanazono-sama?"

Nagisa felt her face crumple, and even Tamao looked at a loss for something to say. A long silence followed.

"I sense I've erred in my choice of polite conversation," Hazuki said carefully. "Is this a bad time..?"

"No, it's not your fault," Nagisa said, forcing as much of a smile as she could muster. "I'm sure Shizuma-sama is fine. I just… haven't heard from her in a while."

"You got a letter yesterday," Tamao reminded her. "And the day before that."

"Oh, that's wonderful," Hazuki smiled, but it faded slightly as she peered at Nagisa. "Er, it *is* wonderful, right?"

"Yes, they were lovely letters," Nagisa sighed. "I just… miss her very much."

"Less than two weeks, Nagisa-chan," Tamao assured her. "And I'm sure there will be more letters."

"I just wish I could hear her voice," Nagisa frowned, then checked herself as she realized that she was talking about this to a near-complete stranger. "I mean…"

"Is she extremely busy where she is?" Hazuki asked, tilting her head to one side.

"Oh, probably. She's at University. I'm grateful she has time for the letters, really."

"It's a shame we can't have phones in the dormitory," Tamao sighed. "That would make everything so much easier."

Hazuki paused in the midst of the sip she was taking, then set her mug down and looked from one girl to the other. "Wait, say that again?"

Nagisa blinked at her. "We can't have wireless phones in the dormitory," she repeated. "It's in the rules."

"Yes, rule ten," Tamao added. "You *have* read the rules, right?"

"Well, yes, I read that," Hazuki nodded, looking bemused. "It said phones and *beepers*, so I just assumed it was fifteen years or so out of date. In the classrooms I can understand, but do they *really* not allow phones in the *dormitory* ?"

"Oh yes," Tamao nodded. "If the Sisters catch you with one they'll confiscate it."

"I'd love to call Shizuma-sama if I could," Nagisa pouted. "I have her number memorized and everything."

There was a long pause, and when Nagisa looked up from her tea, she saw that Hazuki was giving her an unsettlingly intent look. After a few moments, the dark-haired Spican stood up and regarded her. "Come with me."

Hazuki led the two Miator girls back to her room on the second floor. "Close the door behind you," she said to them as she crossed the room and began rummaging on her desk.

"Um, Hazuki-san?" Nagisa said with more than a note of nervousness in her voice. "What's this all about?"

Tamao closed the door as instructed, then studied the room of their fellow fifth-year, finding it fairly spartan in nature, with the only real decoration being a large sword hanging on the wall beside the bed. It certainly had the sense of someone who didn't yet feel at home… or perhaps all her things were at Chikaru's?

"Here we are," Hazuki smiled, apparently having found what she was looking for. "I guess it's just as well I don't carry this with me anymore." She beckoned Nagisa closer, then pressed a clamshell wireless phone into the redhead's hand.

"Hazuki-san!" Nagisa gasped.

"It's fully charged," Hazuki went on. "I've barely used it for months, so it should have plenty of minutes. Call Hanazono-sama, and talk as long as you like."

"B-but Hazuki-san, if the Sisters catch me with it, they'll take it away!"

"Which is why you're going to stay here with the door locked and talk while Tamao-san and I go back to the lounge and have another mug of tea," Hazuki explained patiently. She then shot an almost amused look at Tamao. "If that's okay with you, of course."

"Of course," Tamao nodded, noting that Nagisa's expression of shock was making the slow transition to excitement. For a moment, she felt a pang of something not unlike jealousy that she had not been able to do something like this for her Nagisa-chan, but she quickly pushed that thought aside.

"But… the rules…"

Hazuki surprised both girls by placing a hand on Nagisa's shoulder and staring down into her eyes. "But nothing," she said with a smile. "Call your lady, then come find us when you're done."

Without waiting for thanks or another weak protest, Hazuki gave Nagisa one last pat on the shoulder, then quickly left the room, beckoning Tamao to follow. Once the two of them were outside and the door was closed, she turned to Tamao and gave her the oddest little smile.

"Do you think she'll do it?"

"I hope so," Tamao sighed. "But Hazuki-san, you could get in trouble for this."

"Nothing new there. Let's just say this was something I needed to do."

"But why?"

Hazuki looked off in another direction for a moment, then turned a wistful smile on Tamao. "Because I know the feeling of being far away from the one I love. So… tea?"

Tamao nodded and followed the taller girl, puzzled at this admission. After all, Chikaru's room was only on the first floor, wasn't it?

Nagisa paced the room a few times, looking at the open phone in her hands, then finally gathered up the nerve to dial. She had no way of knowing if Shizuma would even be there, of course. Should she leave a message? Would Shizuma be with other people? Would she be happy to hear from her?

On the second ring, she heard the other side pick up. "Moshi moshi," said a soft voice.

"Sh- Shizuma-sama?"

"Nagisa?!" Shizuma all but shouted, her voice filled with delight. "Darling, where *are* you?"

"I'm… in the dorms…"

"Aha!" Shizuma crowed. "Naughty girl, did you sneak a phone in past the Sisters?"

"No! I mean, no, this isn't mine. It belongs to the new transfer student, Azuma Hazuki-san. You know, Chikaru-sama's friend that

we met the day we told my parents? She didn't know about the rules, and she loaned it to me so I could talk to you."

"Well, I shall have to thank her. And it's lucky for her I'm no longer Etoile, otherwise I might just have to turn the both of you in."

"Shizuma-sama!"

"Only teasing, darling. So tell me everything! How are you? How's Tamao-chan? How are the new Etoile adjusting?"

As much as Nagisa wanted to answer her beloved's questions, she quickly found that words failed her, and she simply started to laugh.

"Nagisa?" Shizuma asked, laughter in her voice as well.

"I'm just… happy to hear your voice, Shizuma…"

Their original table was still unoccupied by the time they returned, so Tamao and Hazuki once again seated themselves, this time opposite one another. While her new tea was steeping, Tamao took a moment to study her companion: Hazuki was still looking somewhat pensive and distant, but had the shadow of a smile. It was a much *softer* look than Tamao would have expected, given the stories she'd heard thus far about the new girl.

The silence was comfortable enough (unlike many of the ones she'd recently shared with Nagisa), but still, Tamao felt like she should say something. "That was a very nice thing you did for Nagisa-chan."

"I'm glad I had the chance to, but I never thought that just having a phone would make such a difference. It was strange to see her looking so depressed."

"I've seen her worse than this, but never for this long at a time," Tamao admitted. "And if this is how bad she feels just to be away

from her, I live in fear of Shizuma-sama breaking up with her one day. I'd have to hide all the sharp objects."

Even as the last words left her lips, Tamao suddenly remembered one very specific detail in the story Yaya had related about yesterday's tennis match, and she felt her heart drop all the way to her shoes. She looked up at Hazuki to stammer out an apology, but Hazuki's eyes were closed, a pained expression having come over her face.

"I- I'm so sorry, Hazuki-san," she managed, pushing back her chair and standing, suddenly flooded by an overpowering urge to flee her embarrassment. "That- that was thoughtless and rude of me. I didn't mean…"

"Tamao-san," Hazuki said softly, holding up one hand to ward off further apology, "it's okay. Please sit down."

Still blushing hotly, Tamao did as she was asked. "I can't believe I said that."

"Honestly, don't worry about it. It was literally a lifetime ago, and I'm not that girl anymore."

Tamao took a sip of her tea to try to collect herself, then finally met Hazuki's eyes again. "So it was true, then?" she asked in a small voice.

"Yes, it was true," Hazuki nodded, looking weary. "Rumor travels fast around here, I've noticed."

"I'm afraid it does."

Hazuki gave a small laugh, and actually smiled a little. "Etoile-sama must have heard some of the stories before she talked to me this morning. I've never heard someone be quite *that* careful with their words. She must have thought I'd either explode or melt if she said the wrong thing."

Tamao couldn't help but smile at this. While part of her would never be over the loss of the Etoile elections last winter, she had to admit that Amane and Hikari had been quite a complementary pair, with Amane showing impressive skills for the organizational side of the position and Hikari having a greater rapport with the students. "Etoile-sama has a kind heart, though she can occasionally get overwhelmed."

"Well, this is twice I've seen her doing her job in spite of looking scared to death, and that says a lot to me. Speaking of which, I wonder if I'll ever get to meet the other Etoile?"

"Amane-sama is frequently away with the Equestrian team," Tamao pointed out, "though I'm sure you'll get to meet her soon. She's a very impressive woman."

Hazuki nodded and took another drink. Tamao watched her for a moment, then offered "Are you really not upset with me, Hazuki-san?"

"I'm not upset with you," Hazuki assured her. "Like I said, that was… a different person. Other than the fact that my student council president seems to have taken an unhealthy interest in me, in many ways I'm much happier now than I've ever been."

"Because of Chikaru-sama?" Tamao ventured.

At the mention of this name, Hazuki's smile widened. "She's a large part of it, certainly. You could say she brought me back to life."

"I'm happy for you both," Tamao nodded. "Chikaru-sama is *so* wonderful. Though if I may say… I'm a little bit surprised."

"How so?"

Realizing suddenly that she had again steered the conversation into potentially rocky waters, Tamao chose her next words carefully. "Well, it's just that… she's always had so many admirers, but

never… you know… that one person." A light dawned. "Oh! Was she *with* you the entire time, but you just weren't here at Astraea until now?"

To Tamao's surprise, Hazuki began to laugh quietly. She then looked around for a moment before leaning in closer. "Tamao-san, can you keep a secret?"

"A secret?" Tamao repeated, instinctively leaning in as well.

Hazuki rolled her eyes. "It seems silly to call it that, considering, but… yes, it's as good as a secret."

Tamao nodded wordlessly, wondering why Hazuki was willing to take her into confidence like this.

"Chikaru and I," Hazuki said, slowly and deliberately, "are *not* lovers."

The words hung there for a moment, then Tamao blinked a few times. "You're not?"

"We're not."

A sudden misgiving seized the young Miatoran; perhaps Hazuki's words about being far from the one she loved had been metaphorical? "I'm so sorry, what happened?"

Hazuki arched an eyebrow as she sat back. "Pardon?"

"Did something happen? Did you break up?"

"No, no," Hazuki chuckled. "We've never *been* lovers."

Tamao was flummoxed. "But- but you're together all the time, and we always see you holding hands, and they say you're at her room *a lot*…" she broke off with the last one, feeling her earlier blush return.

"All true," Hazuki nodded. "But we're not lovers. I understand that's hard to grasp at this school, but it's the truth."

"Well… if you don't mind me asking, what *are* you, then?"

Hazuki smiled distantly as she considered this. "We've asked ourselves the same question. More than friends… different from sisters… it's something I can't put a name on. But she's the most important person in this world to me, and we both know that we'll always be a part of each other's lives. I love her *deeply*, but we're not lovers. I don't want to say we're 'less than lovers,' though, because there's nothing 'less than' *about* what we have."

"Wow," Tamao said, quietly. She felt the rush of a pleasurable memory, but it quickly cooled. "Nagisa-chan…"

"Hmm?"

"Nagisa-chan… once said something like that about me. It was when we were chosen to run for Etoile. She said I was her most important friend, and that she wanted me to always be a part of her life."

"Has that changed?" Hazuki asked, peering closely into Tamao's eyes.

"I… don't know," Tamao sighed.

She paused to take another drink, trying to think of how to explain it, but Hazuki spoke next. "Are you still in love with her?"

Tamao looked up with surprise. "How did..? Did Chikaru..?"

"I could say something about the rumor mill working both ways," Hazuki grinned, "but I knew before that. Do you remember when we met for the first time?"

"Yes," Tamao nodded.

"You and Hanazono-sama were both holding hands with Nagisa-san. I'd never seen anything quite like it: I could tell just by looking that she was the center of your little three-girl universe. That she was *your* most important person in this world, both of you."

"She… has that effect on people," Tamao said quietly, feeling the blush expand over her face.

"But then, while Nagisa-san and Chikaru were talking, you looked over at me, and our eyes locked. And I saw something very familiar."

Tamao remembered that moment as well, when this stranger had stared at her with a sort of confused intensity. "What was it?"

"It was something I'd seen in the mirror more than once. The look of someone who wants something so desperately, yet she knows it can never be hers."

They held one another's gaze for a long time, then Tamao closed her eyes and nodded. "I think part of me will always be in love with her. But it's a part I can live with. I've had to, for her if not for myself."

Hazuki nodded in reply. "Then be that most important friend. Believe me, someone like that isn't 'less than' *anything* ."

After many long minutes of exchanging stories about Astraea and University, Nagisa paused and took a steadying breath. She had always intended to talk to Shizuma about this, but now that the time had come so unexpectedly, she wasn't quite sure how to begin. "Shizuma-sama, I need to apologize for something."

"Hmm, what terrible thing has my Nagisa done?" Shizuma chuckled.

When Nagisa did not answer right away, Shizuma's tone grew more serious, but remained just as gentle. "Nagisa?"

"The first night I was back," Nagisa explained, swallowing hard, "I was… I missed you so much. I'd never felt so lonely in my life, and I knew I'd never sleep without crying, so… I asked Tamao-chan if I could sleep with her."

There was a short pause, which Nagisa immediately filled with words, the dam of anxiety breaking. "Nothing *happened*, of course. It was just sleep, but it… made me feel less alone to know that someone was there. And I was so embarrassed in the morning that I didn't ask again, and I was worried that you'd think poorly of me, and… so… I need to apologize."

"I see," Shizuma answered.

Nagisa braced herself for the reprimand that was sure to come. She had endlessly imagined how her beloved would respond to this, but what Shizuma said next had never even entered her mind. "So… when are you going to apologize to her?"

"Um, to who?"

"To Tamao-chan."

"But… *you're* the one I need to apologize to."

"For what? Being lonely? Missing me?"

"Shizuma-sama, I slept in another girl's bed!"

"No you didn't. You slept in Tamao-chan's bed."

Nagisa blinked several times. "Um… Tamao-chan's a girl."

"Yes, I've noticed that," Shizuma laughed lightly. "Nagisa, I'm going to tell you something I've tried to tell you before, and I must beg you to listen, and believe me."

"O- okay."

"I *trust* you, Nagisa," Shizuma told her, in a firm voice that nevertheless lost none of its gentle tone. "I love you, and I trust you. And while you may find this harder to believe, I trust Tamao-chan, too." A smile then returned to her voice. "So if you're that set on

apologizing to someone, you should apologize to *her*, because I know full well the way you snore."

"Shizuma-sama…"

"And yes, I'm teasing. It's a cute little snore."

"You're not… upset?" Nagisa asked, scarcely believing it could be true.

"If I'm upset about anything, it's the fact that you're *that* lonesome without me. Nagisa, you're surrounded by people who love you. *Let* them." Shizuma gave a playful chuckle. "Except in the ways that involve moaning and sweating. Those are mine, please."

"All yours," Nagisa laughed, feeling some of the week's tension finally slip away at the forgiving sound of her girlfriend's voice.

"So how did you make peace with Hanazono-sama?"

Tamao cocked an eyebrow at Hazuki. "Who says I have?" she grinned.

Hazuki snorted. "Well said. But it doesn't seem like you harbor her any ill will."

"No, I don't. I… wanted to, for a while. I wanted to…" Tamao stopped short before she could say "hate her," and grimaced at the painfully fresh memories of her past despair. "I felt like she took everything away from me: Nagisa, our chance to be Etoile… my entire future, really. For a time I wondered what would have happened if I hadn't… pushed them together in the end. What if I'd begged Nagisa to stay with me instead?"

"And what do you think *would* have happened?"

Tamao made a vague circular gesture with one hand. "That's just it. I have no idea. Before that day, I used to have so many clear visions of what life with Nagisa could be, but… now it seems like it couldn't have gone any other way. I guess I finally realized it up on that stage, so… I let her go, whether or not she was mine to let go in the first place."

"I see," Hazuki nodded. "So again, how did you make peace with Hanazono-sama?"

"It took some time," Tamao admitted, "but really, it started the night after the election. It was late -- maybe one in the morning -- and I was alone in my room, still in my Etoile dress. I was too numb to even think about sleep. But then… something extraordinary happened."

When she paused, Hazuki raised both eyebrows. "What?"

"Nagisa-chan came back," she smiled.

Hazuki blinked. "Came back how?"

"Came back to our room. We were afraid to face each other at first, but in the end, she held me for the rest of the night while I cried in her lap. It was their first night after finally admitting their feelings for one another and… she came back to take care of me."

"You're right," Hazuki whispered. "That *is* extraordinary."

"No, what was *really* extraordinary was what Nagisa-chan told me in the morning. She'd been so torn over what had happened, but in the end, it was *Shizuma* who asked her to come to me. She… she told Nagisa that I needed my friend that night more than she needed her new lover. And that told me something I'd never have expected about Hanazono Shizuma-sama."

"You still sound impressed," Hazuki smiled.

"That was actually just the beginning, though," Tamao shrugged. "Things were still awkward for the next few days, but then she walked up to me out of the clear blue one Saturday and asked me on a date."

"A date… with her and Nagisa-san?"

"That's what I thought too, but no, it was just the two of us. And let me tell you, it started out *very* uncomfortably. We walked around town together for a while, and then, clever girl that she is, she took me exactly where she needed to. Her favorite bookstore."

"Aha."

This memory brought a genuine smile to Tamao's face, and she gazed out the nearby window as she recounted it. "We walked up and down the stacks together, we talked about fiction, about poetry, about history, and… came to find out that we have a lot of favorite authors and poets in common. We spent two hours in there, covering every topic imaginable, and by the time she took me to dinner, we were comparing experiences and laughing and… I was having the most fun I'd had in weeks. I was able to talk to her about things I'd never been able to discuss with Nagisa-chan, who as much as I love her is not the most well-read person in the world. And just like that, in the space of one evening, I no longer had a rival: I had a new friend."

She looked back at Hazuki, curious to see how the other girl would react, but to her surprise, Hazuki's eyes were closed. "Hazuki-san?"

"I'm listening," Hazuki assured her, eyes fluttering open. "Forgive me, I was just…" She broke off for a moment, then started over. "I like your voice. It's… soothing. It reminds me of someone I knew before…" She looked away, suddenly embarrassed. "And I'll stop right there before I cross the line into irredeemably creepy."

"Oh, it's okay," Tamao replied, feeling strangely flattered. She had been complimented on her voice before, but usually in the context of her poetry recitals.

"So… please go on. New friend?"

"It was quite an adjustment," Tamao admitted. "But Shizuma-sama was determined, and really, I had no reason to resist. I had a couple more bookstore dates before the end of term with just her, as well as several dinners and long talks together, all three of us. It all became very comfortable. And in private, she made it very clear that hurting me had never been her intention. She told me that she knew how important I was to Nagisa, and that made me important to her as well."

Hazuki nodded, but said nothing.

"I wanted for so long to be the one to make my Nagisa-chan happy," Tamao sighed, "but after those last months with the two of them, I saw that the bond they had… it did more than just make Nagisa-chan happy: it made *both of them* happy. More than that, each of them was a better *person* for the love of the other. How could I ask for anything more for my two dear friends?"

When Tamao looked up from her tea, she saw that Hazuki was looking not at her, but at a point just over her shoulder.

"My Tamao-chan makes me *very* happy," said a small voice from just behind Tamao.

She turned to see Nagisa standing there, eyes shining, looking happier than she had in ages.

"Nagisa-chan," Tamao whispered, standing to face her friend. "Um, how much of that did you hear?"

"Enough," Nagisa grinned, stepping forward to embrace Tamao. "I'm sorry I've been so hard to reach lately, Tamao-chan. I think I'll be much better now."

Tamao returned the hug, feeling her embarrassment slip into happiness. She knew there would still be regrets and loneliness and

awkward moments, but it was nothing they wouldn't be able to face together as the dearest of friends.

And maybe that wouldn't be "less than" anything after all.

As they broke, Tamao noticed Hazuki standing beside them. "I'll leave you two to talk, then," the dark-haired Spican smiled. "Thank you for the company."

Nagisa reached to grip Hazuki's arm gently. "I… left it in your top desk drawer. Thank you *so* much, Hazuki-san. You can't know what this meant to me."

"Anytime," Hazuki nodded. "And I mean that. I'll keep it charged for you."

With that, she was gone, leaving Nagisa and Tamao to return to their table, both of them in immeasurably better spirits.

Hazuki took the stairs back to the second floor, feeling quite pleased with this first Etoile-induced experiment in getting to know her peers. It had been a pleasure to do something so simple, and yet so obviously profound, and she felt well on the way to having her first new friends in… well, other than Chikaru and (charitably) Lilith, in nigh on forever.

As she reached her room, an idea struck quite suddenly: something almost as simple, and potentially even better.

Closing and locking her door behind her, Hazuki retrieved the phone from the top drawer, where Nagisa had left it, then opened it up and checked the call log. She highlighted the number most recently called and pressed the redial key.

After two rings, a curious voice came. "Nagisa?"

"Hello, is this Hanazono Shizuma-sama?"

"It is," came the reply, a soft note of question in her voice.

"My name is Azuma Hazuki. Nagisa-san was borrowing my phone."

"Yes, thank you for that," Shizuma replied, the smile more than evident in her tone. "It was very kind of you."

"It was my pleasure. Do you… have a moment, Hanazono-sama? I wanted to… propose something, if I could."

"Oh?"

Next: Seduction

Seduction

My place is of the sun

And this place is of the dark

And I do not feel the romance

I do not catch the spark

By grace, my sight grows stronger

And I will not be a pawn

-Indigo Girls

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Part 4: Seduction

Hikari Konohana was deeply concerned, not to say confused.

She wished she could talk to Amane about this, or even Shizuma. Perhaps the former Etoile had experienced something similar in the past? Hikari did not remember any stories of past students with suicidal tendencies, but maybe Shizuma could provide some insight? It was Hikari's duty, as Etoile, to help those in need, but this was something well beyond her experience.

What she really needed was to get a professional opinion from her mother, but that would of course be met with the normal lecture on confidentiality and the sanctity of the bond between patient and doctor. Not that Hikari was a doctor like her mother, or had even the tiniest fraction of the training (and experience) that she possessed, of course. She'd barely even been Etoile for a season, and was certainly no psychiatrist.

And really, Hazuki was in the best possible hands with Chikaru, wasn't she? Maybe, Hikari reasoned, she would be best served by talking to the Lulim council president.

This, of course, would mean admitting that (in her legitimate concern after Kaname's reprehensible actions on the tennis court) she had blundered into the middle of what had obviously been a private moment between the two. Further, it would mean admitting that she had stayed and listened even after realizing that this was not her place, even as Etoile.

What *was* her place, then? Simply to go on attempting to give well-meant advice to Hazuki without acknowledging what she knew?

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Hikari went back to her notebook. She'd written as many details as she could remember in the days since the incident in the woods, trying desperately to be a professional like her mother and make sense of them. She knew she hadn't heard everything, but even the amount she had was confusing to say the least.

Azuma Hazuki, St. Spica, Fifth Year

Separated from real (birth?) parents, who do not know where she is. Has or had a sister. Was she a runaway? She seemed to show genuine regret that her true parents would never know what happened to her, and more than that, seemed very certain of this. Why couldn't she contact them? And if she had in fact been a runaway, had her sister gone with her, or were they separated as well?

Strained relationship with current (adoptive?) parents, whose success leaves her feeling isolated. And how tragic would it be to go from one bad family situation to another? Hikari feared the worst from the amount unsaid: had she been abused *and* neglected?

Some form of physical disability, from which she has now fully recovered (bandaged leg?). It was hard to imagine how someone

so physically imposing as Hazuki could have been the shell described by both Kaname and Hazuki herself. As much as her stomach turned at the memory of Kaname's words on the court, Hikari had to agree with some of the sentiment: how *had* Hazuki recovered so quickly and dramatically? Had her physical condition been… what was the word… psychosomatic? Was her healthy body a sign of an increasingly healthy mind? That would be ideal, of course.

The next part, of course, was the most worrisome:

Attempted suicide by overdose in December. Memory damaged at the time (?) but has returned (?) and she says she remembers how it felt to die. Scared by experience? Tries to suppress memories. Physical recovery seems directly linked to failed suicide attempt. Near-death experience? Renewed hope? Miracle? The last had been written in near-desperation as Hikari tried to make some sense of it all. It was clear from her words that Hazuki had truly wanted to die, but when she did not, she came back from the edge with new strength to overcome her obstacles and move on with her life. And in the process had shown ridiculously good kendo skills and the strength to launch a tennis ball probably into the ocean. Psychosomatic or not, miracle was looking more and more likely.

Adoptive parents thought attempt was not real, which Hazuki-san resents. Recovery tied to resentment of parents? How much of what Hazuki was doing was for her own good, and how much was anger at her family?

Then, of course, there was Chikaru's role to consider in all of this:

Knew Chikaru-sama before attempt? After waking up from attempt, immediately came to Astraea to see Chikaru-sama (strawberries?). Memory loss at the time? Hazuki-san and Chikaru-sama both speak of pre-attempt Hazuki-san as a different person. Chikaru-sama's idea? Method to cope with memories? Also, it was obvious enough that Hazuki and Chikaru

were deeply involved now, personally. Was that new? Hikari had a hard time believing their relationship could have predated December's attempt, even if they had known one another (which seemed certain enough, since Hazuki knew to come to her after waking up). How could anyone in love with someone like Chikaru even consider taking her own life?

Or were they not in love at all? Was theirs a bond strictly based on need? That thought terrified Hikari all the more, because if Hazuki's will to live was completely tied up in another person, that couldn't be good for her in the long run.

The last note on the page was the one that made the least sense:

" ***This world?"***

Those had been the first words she'd heard clearly. Hazuki had been whispering, but had emphasized these two words (particularly the first), allowing them to be discerned over the others. Hikari had missed what had come next, only hearing more clearly again when Hazuki had begun speaking of her memories in a trembling, angry voice.

By themselves, the words were not an issue, as they could have fit into any number of sentences. What was confusing was the emphasis on *this*, and the subsequent implication of there being more than one. By " *this* world," did she mean Astraea? Academia in general? Something else?

Sighing deeply, Hikari rubbed her aching head. She hoped Amane would be back soon: she wasn't sure she could figure this one out on her own.

Moreover, she hoped Hazuki wouldn't have any more dealings with Kenjyo Kaname…

After showering, Hazuki returned to her assigned locker, one towel wrapped around her torso while she used a second one to continue wringing out her long hair. She would have preferred to wait to shower until she returned to her room at the dormitory, but this had been a particularly sweaty workout, and she only had the one clean uniform at present. Before doing anything else, as always, she took out a roll of bandages and wrapped her left calf. Once this was sufficiently taped up, she dropped her towels on the bench and began the actual process of getting dressed.

She'd gotten as far as underthings and tying her hair up into a loose ponytail (to be endlessly brushed later) when she became aware that someone was watching her. She felt her skin flush for a moment as she realized she didn't know how long eyes had been on her: was she letting her guard down that much in this new place?

"Can I help you with anything?" she asked.

"Possibly," came an amused voice, followed by approaching footsteps. Hazuki looked over to see a brown-haired girl in a Spica uniform smiling at her in a way that could only be called appraising. "Let's see, one hundred eighty-five centimeters, knee-length black hair, *piercing* blue eyes, perpetually bandaged leg… you *must* be Azuma Hazuki-san."

"I'm told I'm difficult to miss," Hazuki nodded, pulling her uniform shirt out of her locker and slipping it over her shoulders.

"I don't believe we've ever been properly introduced. Do you know who I am?"

Hazuki looked back at the other girl for a moment, and for the first time noticed that she was not quite in uniform: the generous cleavage was her first clue. "Student Council Assistant Kiyashiki Momomi-sama." she said before turning her attention back to getting dressed.

"Very good! But please, call me Momomi. May I call you Hazuki, Azuma-san?"

"If you must," Hazuki grated.

"That's good. I'd rather we start out friends before, well…" Her wicked grin was all too noticeable even in Hazuki's peripheral vision.

"Before you start rattling off details about my personal life in large crowds?"

"Now, that's not fair, Hazuki-chan. We're not all of us like Kenjyo-sama."

"Perhaps not, but I've heard enough to know that you and she are one another's better halves."

Momomi made a sour noise. "Please. There was nothing *better* about that." Smile back in place, she reached out a hand to trace a path along Hazuki's arm, following the gentle curve of musculature with her fingers. "Nothing better at all, really."

Hazuki turned to Momomi and gave her approximately the same look she'd given the so-called Siberian Tiger after she'd sliced his gun in half with her sword. To Momomi's credit, she quickly withdrew her hand. Perhaps she had more sense than Kaname after all.

Or perhaps not, as her smile turned into an almost comical frown. "Poor Hazuki-chan. So tense and surly. I would have thought a week or two in Chikaru-san's bed might have lightened you up a little?"

"Tell me something, Kiyashiki-sama: do you actually *hear* yourself when you speak?"

"There's no need to be hostile." Crossing her arms, Momomi leaned against the row of closed lockers. "Anyway, it's no secret that you've started off on the wrong foot at St. Spica, and I can help you with that. Among… *other* things."

"Ah," Hazuki nodded, catching the obvious double-entendre. "So *that's* what this is about?"

"I just want to… get to know you better, Hazuki-chan."

Hazuki shrugged, then began slipping on that damnably short skirt. "Very well. I'm a Capricorn, my favorite stone is carnelian, I'm very proud of my cooking skills, and when I was younger I used to play entirely too much Everquest. Anything else?"

With a deepening smile, Momomi inched further into Hazuki's personal space. "I wasn't thinking so much about *talking*…"

"Really," Hazuki deadpanned, "don't you think Kenjyo-sama might disapprove?"

"Please," Momomi scoffed again. "She doesn't own me. Besides, I *like* you. Tall, strong, mysterious, not afraid to look like a woman… So hard and yet so… soft. Kaname's a stick-figure next to you, Hazuki-chan."

"I think I liked it better when you were calling me Azuma-san," Hazuki muttered, straightening her uniform tie.

"So angry," Momomi purred. "I can't blame you, I suppose. A virginal choir-girl like Chikaru-san couldn't possibly meet the needs of someone like you."

Hazuki found this an interesting choice of words. Perhaps the student council assistant hadn't heard the stories of what went on in the St. Spica choir?

Momomi came closer still, trying to force eye contact. "I could do things to you that would make you *scream*," she whispered.

"Likewise," Hazuki said under her breath, seating herself on the bench to put on her socks.

"We could both consider it trading up, Hazuki-chan," Momomi continued, apparently not catching the *sotto voce* reply. "And truly, what can Chikaru-san give you that I can't?"

"Do you *really* have time to hear the full answer to that?" Hazuki sighed, trying to get her shoes on so that she could get out of this.

"My samurai," Chikaru grinned, squeezing Hazuki's hand. "So quick to defend me."

"Oh, but *then! Then*, it actually managed to get worse!"

"What did she do?"

"She opened her coat, hung her breasts *right* in my face, and said 'Does Chikaru-san have… *these?* '"

"She didn't!"

"Hand to God."

Chikaru laughed, and with her free hand, pulled open the collar of her uniform and peeked inside. "Yes, they're still there."

"And *far* nicer, if I may say so."

"Thank you very much," Chikaru said with an impish grin. "But may I remind my samurai that she's never actually *seen* them before?"

"A regrettable, but ultimately irrelevant detail. They're yours: they can't *help* but be nicer."

"Well, I *do* keep them well-watered with the tears of young lovers."

Hazuki turned a bewildered look on the Lulim president. "Um…"

Chikaru waved off her confusion with a roll of the eyes. "Never mind. So what did my protector say to defend the honor of my poor,

maligned breasts?"

"Well… *nothing*," Hazuki replied with an annoyed frown. "I… couldn't get any words out through the hysterical laughter."

"Oh, *really?* I'm sure Momomi-san *loved* that! What did she do?"

"I'm… not quite sure." Hazuki admitted, her smile returning at the merry sound of Chikaru's voice. "I literally slipped off the bench and was sitting in the floor, laughing. I think she yelled 'What's so funny?' a couple times, and then she buttoned up her coat and left in a huff. I was *so* disappointed with myself!"

"Disappointed?" Chikaru repeated, raising her eyebrows.

"Yes! Because I was too busy laughing at the absurdity of it all to give her a witty reply, and by the time I came up with something, she was gone! I could have said 'Of course she does, you dolt, she's female!' or 'No, but she *can* lick her own eyebrows,' or 'Well, you should *see* the things she does with her puppets,' or even grabbed my own and said 'No, Chikaru-sama has *these!* '"

Chikaru started giggling uncontrollably somewhere around the word "eyebrows," and might have rolled right out of her bed if Hazuki hadn't been sitting there to block her. " *Hello* there, Wicked Hazuki! I like you! Can you come out to play more often?"

"That was the clumsiest, most clichéd attempt at seduction I've ever experienced, and I spent most of a year with *Lilith* . It was like she was reading straight out of the Lesbian Bad Pickup Lines Handbook."

"I'm not sure that book's in the library, even here at Astraea."

"Is that… *standard* around here?" Hazuki asked. "Because if that level of cheese is considered acceptable, how does *anyone* on this campus still like girls? That was enough to make me want to run

screaming back toward heterosexuality. Am I going to need to go find a boy to kiss to remind myself that I don't like it?"

"Perhaps I could clutch you against my grateful bosoms until you recovered?" Chikaru winked.

Hazuki made an exaggeratedly thoughtful face. "Hmm, that would be ironic. Pleasant, but ironic."

Chikaru grinned hugely. "Ah, irony. And to answer your question, no, that's not standard. Even I've heard better, in spite of my longstanding reputation for chastity. I told you before that Naoko helped put people in touch with their feelings, but as far as acting on them? We're still on our own, there."

"That was the soonest after a shower that I've ever wanted *another* shower," Hazuki grumbled, finally letting herself collapse next to Chikaru, her story told.

Chikaru propped herself up on one elbow to look down at the other girl. "Perhaps I should take you up on your offer for kendo lessons after all. That way I can help you keep the ravenous hordes at bay."

Hazuki smiled. "I'd like that," she said with sincerity rather than humor. "I'm very curious to know if the *Souma* would help you learn it as quickly as it helped me."

"You're sure it was the *Souma*, then?"

"It's the only thing that makes sense."

"How long have you been studying kendo, really?"

"Really?" Hazuki repeated. "Formally, only since I came back to this world. That's why I'm sure the *Souma* was involved: I left my world with a letter-opener, and appeared in Lilith's library with a sword that I somehow figured out how to use as I went. Once I got back, kendo took a week to master, tops."

"Interesting," Chikaru pondered. "No swords at all in your old life, eh?"

"None. My sport was volleyball. Well, and I ran the high hurdles for a while, but I was dropped from the team for refusing to cut my hair."

"Hmm, let's make a deal, then," Chikaru smiled. "You give me lessons to see if you can bring out my inner sword goddess, but only if you practice some meditation with me as well. Maybe I can put you in touch with the more gentle side of your *Souma* ."

Hazuki cocked an eyebrow at her. "It has a gentle side?" she asked, half in jest.

"You already *know* that, Hazuki-chan. Can't a fire warm as well as burn?"

Kaname looked up from her papers as the door to her council office clicked open, then closed.

"And?" she said, eyes returning to the school documents she'd been perusing.

Momomi gave a frustrated sigh. "She didn't bite."

"You're losing your touch, Momomi," Kaname grinned wickedly.

"This was a bad idea: she knew about us already. There was no way she was going to listen to me knowing I was attached to you." The assistant crossed her arms. "I'll bet she doesn't even like girls."

"And I'm sure those grapes are sour," Kaname said quietly, chuckling to herself.

"What was that?" Momomi snapped.

"May I remind you," Kaname said, putting an edge in her voice, "that this 'bad idea' was originally yours? Tempt her away from Minamoto-

san, you said. Embarrass her, you said. But you were so *eager* to try it, Momomi, now why *is* that?"

She studied her off-again on-again lover's face for a few moments. She knew every one of Momomi's pouts, scowls and frowns by heart, but this one was something fairly new. Was it a "caught in the act" look?

Naturally, Momomi immediately turned it around on her. "I don't like this, Kaname. I don't like the way you're always thinking about Azuma-kun. I'm getting tired of your obsessions, and I will *not* spend another year with you in my bed while you run around after the new shiny. First Minamoto-sama, then Ohtori-sama, and now this freak? Let her be Chikaru-san's newest dress-up doll and leave well enough alone!"

That said, Momomi turned on her heel and left the office, fuming. Kaname flinched as the door slammed behind her.

Once she was alone again, Kaname briefly rubbed her temples and let out a long sigh. She was certain that Momomi's mission to seduce Hazuki had been more than she'd let on: that sort of petty revenge-play was almost to be expected after the turmoil they'd been through. But while she'd suspected it all along, in the end Kaname had allowed her lover to carry out this ridiculous plan with full knowledge that Azuma, even as unstable as she was, would never have fallen for it.

Part of her wished she had been there to see it.

Kaname swiveled her chair around and gazed out the window, remembering the first dinner of term, and the first and only time she'd touched Azuma's face. She was certain she'd felt something -- almost a spark of energy -- and she felt a mix of drawn to and repulsed by it. Whichever it was, though, it was becoming increasingly difficult to get the feeling out of her head. It reminded her strongly of the Minamoto sisters, particularly the elder. What was

it? Momomi would no doubt rave on about obsession, but Kaname felt she needed to know.

With a snort of self-derision, the Spica council president dismissed the thoughts of supernatural claptrap before she could find herself musing about chakras and colored auras. Maybe it *was* time to leave well enough alone, at least for now. After all, the dorms had already been abuzz with whispers about the new girl's questionable sanity and troubled past. The insult at the first dinner had been repaid in kind, and Azuma would not present a threat for now.

And if later this should change? She'd be more than ready.

"Did she at least say *why* she wanted us to meet her here?" Nagisa asked Tamao as they headed down the second-floor hallway toward Hazuki's room.

"No, just that it was important that you came in particular," Tamao replied. "She said she had a surprise for you." That said, they stopped in front of their schoolmate's door, and Tamao rapped twice.

Moments later, Hazuki opened the door, popped her dark head out and gave the pair an almost mischievous smile. "Good evening Tamao-chan, Nagisa-chan."

"Good evening, Hazuki-chan. May we come in?" Tamao smiled.

"Only after you cover Nagisa-chan's eyes," Hazuki said with a deepening grin.

"Huh?" Nagisa exclaimed. "Why do I need my eyes covered?"

"Part of the surprise, Nagisa-chan," Tamao winked. She then got behind her roommate and reached around to hold her hands over the redhead's eyes while Hazuki took one of the now-blinded girl's hands.

"This way," came Hazuki's voice as she tugged a bewildered Nagisa into the room. She heard Tamao kick the door closed behind them, and then the three lurched forward a few steps. "Carefully. Come around this way now. Have a seat." Nagisa then felt a chair nearby, so she gingerly eased herself into it. All the while, Tamao's hands remained over her eyes.

"Are you ready?" Tamao asked.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to be ready *for*," Nagisa frowned.

Suddenly, Tamao's hands were gone, and Nagisa blinked a few times in the sudden brightness of the room. She was sitting at Hazuki's desk, where a laptop computer was open and running.

Nagisa's breath caught in her throat as her eyes were drawn to the screen, where a familiar silver-framed face with emerald eyes was looking back at her.

"Surprise," Shizuma smiled.

"Sh- Shizuma-sama?" Nagisa gasped. She looked from the screen, to Tamao, and finally to Hazuki. "What..?"

"Wireless broadband and a webcam," Hazuki explained, leaning in to shoot a grin at the screen. "I talked to Shizuma-sama a few days ago to set this up, and here you are. For not being allowed phones here, this building gets a surprisingly good signal."

"It's good to see you, sweetheart," Shizuma's voice came over the tiny speakers. The image was a little grainy, but there was no mistaking the twinkle in those green eyes. "Maybe this will help fill those several-week gaps a bit better?"

Still at a loss, Nagisa again looked up at an almost smirking Tamao. "Tamao-chan, you were in on this and didn't tell me!"

"Well, Hazuki-chan was very persuasive," Tamao shrugged. "And besides, I wanted to see the cute look of shock on your face."

"At any rate," Hazuki went on, "Tamao-chan and I are going to go have some tea again while the two of you talk. After you're done tonight, you can borrow the laptop for a while. I won't be needing it right away, and Shizuma-sama says she'll bring you a better one when she comes to visit, anyway."

It was too much for Nagisa. Without thinking, she threw her arms around Hazuki and hugged her. "Thank you, Hazuki-chan! This is wonderful!"

"You're welcome, of course!" Hazuki laughed.

After a few seconds of embrace, Shizuma cleared her throat melodramatically. "You two *do* know you're on camera, right?"

Next: Storyteller

Storyteller

AUTHOR'S FIRST NOTE: We interrupt your regularly scheduled shoujo-ai and alleged Tamao/Hazuki subtext (really, where are you *getting* these ideas?) for a chapter that swings the crossover pendulum back into Yamibou territory for a bit.

AUTHOR'S SECOND NOTE: As a refresher, and for those who have not read *Red Bows In Her Hair* : Eve, Naoko and Hatsumi are all the same person (or supernatural entity, if you prefer).

AUTHOR'S THIRD NOTE (ADDED BELATEDLY): The bit in the first note about Tamao/Hazuki subtext was a joke. I fail miserably in my attempt at tongue-in-cheek humor.

I said "Darkness into darkness,

All the carnage of my journeys,

Makes it harder to be living"

He said "It's a long road to be forgiven"

-Indigo Girls

Part 5: Storyteller

Kaname tucked a stray lock of hair behind the new girl's ear, then traced one finger along her jawline, leaving a trail of green sparks. She found herself amused at the way Azuma-kun tensed up at the sensation. "So," she said quietly. "You're the one who finally coaxed Minamoto out of her closet, eh? I thought I'd never see the day."

She waited for the infuriated (and infuriating) response that she knew was coming, but when the glow from her touch cleared, it was no longer Hazuki's face before her. Instead, she found herself staring into eyes that looked like polished carnelian, and an innocent face framed by blonde hair and red bows.

And then it was another meal, three years before, and the kiss she had stolen from Minamoto Naoko-sama. All eyes were upon her, looking at her with shock and disbelief for what she had done, but the most important eyes, those of this girl she wanted so badly, held an expression of only mild surprise, slowly becoming tenderness.

And then came a voice that she knew was Naoko-sama's, in spite of the fact that the girl had never spoken a word aloud: "It's okay, Kaname-chan," she said without moving her lips. "I forgive you."

Kaname shook her head, as if trying to force out this voice that was not her own. "No," she whispered inside her own mind, even as she felt her eyes filling with tears. "I haven't done anything wrong. I don't need to be forgiven!"

" *And yet I forgive you."*

Tears spilled down her cheeks as Kaname backed away, still feeling the weight of every gaze in the room. "I'm not that person! I don't need it! I don't NEED it!"

"Kaname! *Kaname!* "

With a gasp, Kaname opened her eyes, the words of denial still on her lips. But this was not Naoko-sama's voice that had awakened her, and the eyes she found herself looking up into were different, even in the darkness.

"Momomi?" she whispered.

"You were shaking," Momomi said in a tremulous voice. "God, I thought you were having a seizure!"

As uncomfortable as their past few days together had been, Momomi's concern seemed nothing but genuine. Perhaps she was just in a vulnerable state, but Kaname actually felt touched. "I'm sorry I woke you," she said, brokenly. "It was just a nightmare."

" *Just* a nightmare?"

Kaname pulled Momomi closer and kissed the lines of worry on her forehead. "I'm fine, honestly."

Momomi looked searchingly into her eyes for a moment, then slowly settled beside her again. "Well, next time flail in the other direction," she said, slipping back into somewhat forced sarcasm.

"You could always go back to your own bed," Kaname reminded her.

There was no reply, and eventually both of them drifted back to sleep.

The St. Lulim Girls' School Transformation Club Welcomes You to our Semi-Annual Ninjas Vs. Pirates Spectacular!

Hazuki grinned as she stepped beneath the banner and into the midst of a small horde of costumed buccaneers. The crowd in the courtyard outside St. Lulim was larger than she had anticipated, considering that the Transformation Club (like so many of St. Lulim's other organizations) had only three or four permanent members, and she recognized the faces of girls from all three of Astraea's schools in attendance. Refreshments were in the form of gold doubloon and shuriken cookies (served from an impressive-looking treasure chest and a series of bandoleers stitched together from cloth napkins, respectively), along with several bowls containing punch of indeterminate origin.

"Hazuki-senpai, you look brilliant!" came a voice from to her right, and Hazuki looked over to see Remon approaching, her face one huge grin. She wore a three-cornered hat with the requisite skull-

and-crossbones, and her rectangular-framed glasses were worn over an equally standard eyepatch. The rest was typical pirate regalia, from the blousy shirt to the faux-leather leggings and cuffed boots.

"Thank you, Remon-san!" Hazuki smiled at the younger girl. "Though it's not through any talent of my own: I have Chikaru-sama to thank for loaning me the costume." She looked herself over once more, from the swashbuckler's shirt to the embroidered vest, from the knee-high boots to the blood-red leggings, from the wooden cutlass to the wide-brimmed hat and its several long feathers.

"Yes, I think parts of that were from the one she wore last year. It looks fantastic on you!"

Hazuki looked around the crowd for a moment, then noticed something odd. "Why are there only pirates, though?"

Kizuna, attired in a similar manner to her classmate (and everyone else, really), appeared seemingly from nowhere. "As much as I'd like to make a joke about all the ninjas being invisible…" she said.

"… No one ever seems to want to be ninjas," Remon finished for her.

"So it looks like the pirates will win again this year," Kizuna giggled.

"Hey, Hazuki-senpai, will your friend Lilith-san come to visit again sometime?" Remon grinned, eyes shining with excitement. "I bet *she'd* make a *great* pirate!"

"I have no doubt she would," Hazuki nodded. "But it may be a while before we can see her again." As in, probably not ever, but Hazuki did not really want to say so.

"Hazuki-san!" another voice called, and Hazuki looked to her left to see another costumed pair approaching. The shorter of the two (and the one who had spoken) she recognized as Hikari, the young Etoile, who was dressed more like a captured princess than a pirate wench.

She was on the arm of a tall woman in a long embroidered tailcoat with a ruffled shirt-front. At first glance, the dark hair cut in a boyish style reminded Hazuki of Kaname, but the features were somewhat softer, and the eyes seemed friendly, if reserved.

"Good morning, Etoile-sama," Hazuki bowed to Hikari, noting from the corner of her eye that Kizuna and Remon had already disappeared to go squeal over another classmate's attire.

"I'm so glad you're here," Hikari smiled. "I'd like you to meet someone. Azuma Hazuki-san, may I present Etoile-sama Ohtori Amane."

Hazuki gave a low bow. "Etoile-sama."

"I'm glad to meet you," Amane nodded. Her contralto voice, combined with her manly attire and haircut, made her quite the contrast to her very girlish partner. "I'm sorry to have been away so long. I would have liked the chance to welcome you to St. Spica in person."

"Etoile-sama has been very determined to help me adjust," Hazuki said with a smile and nod to Hikari.

Hikari departed to get refreshments, leaving the two taller women alone in the crowd. "Hazuki-san," Amane said in a quiet voice, "I must apologize for the behavior of our student council president. I understand she has been unfairly harsh with you, and I'll be having words with her over this."

"Thank you, Etoile-sama, but I think she's bored with me now," Hazuki said wryly. "I've been keeping my head down as much as I can."

"I understand you've been a model student both in the classroom and with the kendo team."

"That's kind of you to say, Etoile-sama."

A look of discomfort briefly flashed across the elder Etoile's eyes, and she leaned in somewhat closer. "Hazuki-san, if Kenjyo-san continues to hound you, please let either Hikari-chan or myself know. And… if there's anything else, anything at all… *troubling* you," Amane paused and seemed to briefly struggle with the words, "you can always come to us. And I do hope that you will."

Hazuki nodded, quickly reading the subtext. *If you feel the urge to kill yourself again, let us know first.* "Thank you, Etoile-sama," she repeated. "There have been a couple of interesting moments, but I'm very happy to be here."

"I'm glad to hear it," Amane said with a small, only slightly uncomfortable smile.

At this point Hikari arrived with cookies and two cups of punch, so Hazuki politely excused herself and slipped through the crowd, leaving the Etoile to themselves. She smiled as she saw Kagome nearby, the girl's ever-present teddy bear also dressed for the occasion, eyepatch and all.

Suddenly, Hazuki felt a tap on her shoulder, and a voice said "There you are! Let me see, now."

Hazuki turned around to look into Chikaru's smiling face. The Lulim president took a step back to appraise Hazuki's costume, and at that moment Hazuki felt her heart positively leap in her chest.

Chikaru looked *gorgeous* .

She wore a variant on the puffy swashbuckler shirt, but in her case it was much briefer, leaving her shoulders and midriff bare, with a tiny demi-corset laced tightly up the front. The leggings were daringly low-waisted skintight leather, and were laced on either side all the way from knee to hip. Her hat, tilted rakishly, was decorated with several long plumes, and from beneath the brim, her dark eyes sparkled with humor and mischief.

"Oh, this turned out nicely!" she said, but Hazuki barely heard her. "I was worried that the leggings wouldn't quite work because of our height difference. But you wear it *very* well, Hazuki-chan!"

"You," Hazuki started, but found her throat dry. She swallowed once and continued. "You're beautiful," she managed.

Chikaru stepped closer and took both of Hazuki's hands. "Is that a good thing?" she asked, her smile no less wide, but with the tiniest note of concern in her voice.

Hazuki felt an unabashed, almost goofy smile cross her features. "Oh, it's a very good thing," she nodded.

"Thank you," Chikaru replied, adjusting her hat to lean in and kiss Hazuki's cheek. "Tell me later?" she asked quietly.

"It's nothing," Hazuki assured her. "Just my curse, remember?"

Chikaru nodded, a brief flash of what looked almost like sadness in her eyes. "I should greet the Etoile. I'll be right back, though." She pulled away, but their joined hands lingered for a moment before she turned to go.

Hazuki took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It was finally happening.

Her single greatest concern in her relationship with Chikaru was that one day she would want more than could be given, and that this desire would come between them, just as it had between her and Hatsumi. That their bond would be tested and damaged by the shame of wanting what could never be hers. And there was no doubt at that moment, deep down, that Hazuki wanted her.

She closed her eyes and waited for the familiar crush of despair.

To her surprise, though, it did not come. Where she expected shame, she felt only excitement tinged with amusement. Where she

expected frustration, she felt at worst a sort of wistful shrug of the shoulders. Where she expected despair at the thought of what her hands could not touch, she felt a visceral thrill at what her eyes had beheld.

Then, with amazing clarity, a series of simple truths swept through her mind. Yes, she was attracted to Chikaru. Yes, she felt a very real rush of desire seeing her in that incredible costume. Yes, if things were different, she would love the chance to kiss her, and hold her, and take her to bed and do… whatever came next.

And that was okay, because things were *not* different, she knew it could not happen, and there was no reason to dwell on it. She could still love and admire her dear friend. They could laugh together, cry together, even cuddle and flirt together to an amazing degree, and there was no reason in the world to let what they could *not* have overshadow the warmth and joy of what they *did* have.

She was so stunned by these wholly uncharacteristic internal revelations that it was several moments before she realized that Chikaru had returned. "Poor Hazuki-chan. Did I break you?"

"No, not at all," Hazuki laughed. "Um, in the interest of not keeping secrets, though, there's something I need to tell you."

"Hmm?" Chikaru asked, leaning closer.

Hazuki paused for a moment, wondering how best to put this. "Would it bother you to know that… for a moment there, seeing you in that outfit, I wanted to drag you back to your room and kiss you madly?"

"Hmm," Chikaru repeated. "That… depends. Does it bother *you* to have thought that, Hazuki-chan?"

"Other than not wanting to offend you? Honestly… no," Hazuki chuckled. "It actually felt kind of nice for a change."

"And… what are your intentions?" Chikaru asked, her voice serious in spite of her continued smile.

Hazuki slowly shook her head. "I don't have any. I've told you before, I know better."

Chikaru gazed into her eyes for a moment, then leaned in and hugged her, nearly dislodging both of their hats in the process. "Are you going to be okay, Hazuki-chan?"

"Better than okay," Hazuki replied, and meant it.

They broke, and Hazuki was shocked to see a trace of tears in the other girl's eyes. "I never want to hurt you, you know," Chikaru whispered.

"You haven't. I don't think you could even if you wanted to."

"You'll let me know if things ever get uncomfortable for you?"

"Only if you do the same. I don't want to hurt you either."

Chikaru squeezed her hands. "In that case," she said, some of the twinkle returning to her eyes, "it doesn't bother me at all that you thought that. Ask me sometime about the letters I got after playing Carmen."

Hands held comfortably, they returned to the crowd, greeting friends and strangers alike. Chikaru introduced Hazuki to several Lulim students she had not previously known, including her two council assistants. To Hazuki's mounting surprise, she noted no eyes ducking away, no whispers behind her back, and no discomfort from her fellow students. It was as though the costumes broke the barriers between them, and their bond as pirate sisters overcame any of the rumors and stories that had been swirling throughout the dormitory since the previous weekend. Surrounded by laughing voices, standing with this dear woman at her side, still almost light-headed

from the very idea of living without guilt, Hazuki felt happier than she had in ages.

But then, with a familiar flash of gold, it all came crashing down.

"Hazuki?" Chikaru asked her, obviously feeling the sudden tension in both her stance and her *Souma* .

"I… saw something," Hazuki whispered, scanning the crowd again. Then, near the edge of the gathering, she caught the sight of a pair of large, ornate golden earrings flashing from beneath the brim of one pirate's hat.

"What is it?"

"Stay with the club," Hazuki said quietly. "I'll be right back."

"Hazuki, wait," Chikaru protested, but Hazuki had already slipped away into the crowd, making as much a beeline as she could for those earrings. As she drew closer, she noticed that the pirate in question had dark skin, with fringes of almost white hair curling from beneath the hat.

"Aaya?" she called.

The figure in the hat looked up at her, eyes going wide, and Hazuki felt her guts turn to ice as she recognized the face. "Aaya!" she called again.

Without a word, the dark-skinned pirate turned and fled. Hazuki broke from the crowd and sprinted after him, leaving a trail of confused voices behind her. A small part of her realized that a new story would be hitting the rumor mill soon, but the rest of her was intent upon the chase.

She did not know clearly who Aaya was, but the strange young man had appeared in almost every one of the worlds Hazuki and Lilith had visited in their search for Hatsumi. He always showed up in

"native dress," and all along seemed to have been watching their progress with a mix of amusement and interest. As for what could have brought him here to Astraea, so long after Hazuki's journey had ended? She felt another chill run though her at the thought of what it could be.

The pursuit took them into the woods. Aaya was fast, no doubt, but even in her costume boots, Hazuki was still slightly faster. "Aaya, stop!" she shouted.

Finally, just short of what Chikaru called Naoko's tree, Hazuki lunged for him, grabbing him by the shoulder and sending the both of them tumbling to a stop. Hazuki wound up sitting on his chest, pinning both of his arms to the ground.

To her surprise, though, Aaya met her scowl with a laugh. "Hello, Hazuki. As forceful as ever, I see!"

"What are you doing here, Aaya?" she growled.

"My dear, can't a fellow crash a costume party without being thrown to the ground and straddled?"

"What are you *doing* here, Aaya?!" she repeated, tightening her grip on his wrists.

"You seem… unhappy to see me," the young man grimaced.

"What gave you *that* idea?" Hazuki scowled. "Maybe it's the fact that every time I see you, it's right before I have to go on to the next world?"

"My goodness. Has Hazuki lost her will to travel, then?"

Hazuki shook her head furiously. "I'm not letting you take me away from here. For the first time in my life I have friends, and a place to belong. I'm *happy* here, and I'm *not* leaving!"

Wincing in pain as Hazuki emphasized her words by more tightly squeezing his wrists, Aaya let out a sigh. "Hazuki, if I told you that my coming here today had nothing to do with you leaving this story, would you *please* get off of me?"

After searching his face for some sign of a trick, Hazuki relented, slowly standing and then offering him a hand. He gratefully accepted it. "Thank you, warrior."

"Tell me what you're doing here," she insisted.

"I already told you," he smiled, indicating his state as a cross-dressed pirate. "I came for the costume party."

"Why here, though? Why this world?"

Aaya leaned up against the tree, crossing his arms. "So eager to defend what's yours," he smirked. "That's the Hazuki I remember."

"You know this world isn't mine," Hazuki frowned.

"Actually, I know no such thing," Aaya shrugged. "This *is* your world now, traveler. You made it that way."

"I… I what?" Hazuki asked, her apprehension turning into confusion.

"It's in your story," Aaya nodded, looking at her appraisingly. "I can see it in your eyes. Haven't you wondered why you arrived *here* when you fell from the Universe Garden?"

Hazuki had indeed wondered this, but said nothing. While it bothered her that Aaya seemed privy to this detail of her past, it did not truly surprise her.

"You're more powerful than you know, Hazuki," Aaya went on. "You should have returned to your birth world, true, but the *Souma* inside you took you to the home you *wished* for, and allowed you to resume the lost life of your other self. Quite impressive, really."

Mind reeling at the thought that she could have made such a choice even as shattered as she'd been, Hazuki shook her head to try to regain focus.

"Well," Aaya said briskly, slapping his hands together, "as much as I would love to stay and provide more valuable exposition to your tale, I should…"

"You still haven't told me why you're here," Hazuki reminded him, taking a threatening step forward.

"Hmm, very perceptive," Aaya grimaced. "But that would require another story."

"I have time," Hazuki replied, crossing her arms.

Aaya nodded, mirroring Hazuki's pose. For a moment, he looked hesitant, but then he met Hazuki's eyes. "The sisters," he said carefully, "have left the Great Library."

"They…" she started, but her voice failed.

"Eve has returned to her roaming ways, but this time she has taken Lilith with her," Aaya went on. "They leave only tiny aspects of themselves as Keepers while they go traipsing through creation together."

Something screamed from Hazuki's heart, but she forced herself to ignore it, knowing somehow that to give it voice would destroy her. "That doesn't tell me why you're here," she whispered, trying to suppress the turmoil by holding onto her indignation.

Aaya regarded her steadily. "Have you ever heard it said that nature abhors a vacuum, Hazuki?"

"The library's been without a guardian before," Hazuki reminded him. "Every time Lilith and I went looking for Eve, we had to leave it empty except for Kogechibi."

"For days and even weeks at a time, yes," Aaya agreed. "But the last time Eve abandoned her duty, it was for thousands of years. Do you know why the library exists, Hazuki? Did Lilith ever tell you at least *that* much?"

Hazuki shook her head wordlessly.

"The Great Library was constructed to defend creation from the godlike forces that would destroy it. It was the presence of a Keeper that held those powers at bay, but with no threats for thousands of years, perhaps the sisters believe creation to be safe without their diligence. And perhaps they are correct, but on the other hand, it is also possible that someone… or some *thing*… will eventually notice their absence."

"So you want me to find them," Hazuki said grimly, feeling the pieces fall into place. "You *said* you didn't come here to take me from this world!"

"And I did not," Aaya assured her. "But the fact remains that if the Keepers do not return, someone will either need to find them… or replace them."

Hazuki shivered involuntarily at the thought.

"So you see, Hazuki, I have been visiting the worlds in which Eve left behind mortals touched with *Souma* . No one else could accomplish what must be done."

"Find someone else, then," Hazuki growled. "I've done my part. I'm only now getting used to being a person again: I can finally live through a day without worrying about whether or not I'll have to kill somebody."

Aaya smiled widely. "I understand, Hazuki, but I'm afraid *you* do not. You see, I *did* come to this world to find someone else."

She stared at him for a moment, and then her heart froze as she realized his meaning. "No. You can't take Chikaru. I won't *let* you!"

"When the time comes, it will not be up to me," Aaya sighed. "Creation will do what it must, and your Chikaru is already quite accomplished with controlling her *Souma* . Thanks in no small part to you, as it happens: reawakening your own has only strengthened hers."

"I won't let it happen," Hazuki repeated, shaking her head. "Not her."

"I'm sorry, dear Hazuki," Aaya smiled sadly, "but as powerful as you may be after your travels, how do you intend to stop it?"

Hazuki closed her eyes, feeling all the happiness of the day, and indeed the months of her new life, shattering into fragments. There was one way she *could* stop it, after all. "I'll go, then," she whispered. "I'll find them."

"You really would, wouldn't you?" Aaya asked, his voice surprisingly gentle.

Hazuki closed her eyes against the sudden tears. "Just… please, let me have time to say goodbye to Chikaru and my friends."

To her surprise, Hazuki felt Aaya take her hand. "You're very brave, dear Hazuki. But there is no need. Not yet."

"What?" Hazuki asked, confused by this unexpected denial.

"I have many more stories to visit, and many more of Eve's touched to watch. For now, there is no danger, and even if it comes, there may be others who rise to the occasion. But it pleases me to know that you would be creation's champion to spare your beloved." Here, some of the mischief returned to his smile. "As they say, you're at the top of a very short list."

With a flash of unexpected humor, Hazuki wondered if even Aaya believed that she and Chikaru were lovers. "I'm flattered."

"I have no way of knowing when, or if, you will be called upon. It could be in a week. It could be in a hundred years."

Hazuki laughed grimly. "I'll be in the ground in a hundred years. You may have trouble getting much help from me then."

Aaya's smile widened as he stared at her for a few moments. "Neither of them told you, did they?" he asked, sounding strangely surprised.

"Told me what?"

"Oh, my dear Hazuki," Aaya sighed, shaking his head. "Do you really think, with all you've seen and experienced, that you're still… mortal?"

Hazuki felt as though something were constricting her breath, and her mind raced uncontrollably at the undeniable truth in his words.

"Haven't you noticed the fact that you barely need to sleep anymore?" Aaya went on. "The almost complete cessation of your menstrual cycle? The impossible feats of strength and agility? Honestly, Hazuki, do you know what the *Souma* is?"

She blinked a few times, then shook her head.

"Consider it… part of the power of creation itself," Aaya explained.

"Can I… die?" Hazuki choked out.

"Sadly, yes, but I wouldn't worry about old age if I were you. For that matter, I wouldn't worry about aging at all after you reach full physical maturity."

Hazuki sank to her knees, as though her mind were suddenly too full to control such mundane matters as standing. She had no more

words, and even less strength.

"I must continue on, Hazuki," Aaya said gently. "You may never see *me* again, but I'll be watching for *you* ."

"What are you?" Hazuki asked, dazedly, looking up at the impossibility of this costumed man. "Lilith never told me. Are you God? An angel? A demon?"

Aaya smiled indulgently and gave her a broad wink. "I am only a storyteller," he said quietly.

Without another word, he walked once around Naoko's tree, and then disappeared into the air.

Hazuki sat there in the clearing, heart and mind shredded from Aaya's revelations, and now that he was gone, one in particular finally fought its way to the center of her world.

Hatsumi had abandoned the library. And had not come to her.

Vividly, Hazuki remembered her second visit to Astraea, when Chikaru had reawakened her memories with a simple touch of her hand, and then held her through the night as she told the tale of her journey's end, and her last night with Hatsumi.

" *She just… held me," Hazuki whispered. "After everything I went through, that was all I wanted: one night in her arms. I just don't understand why she couldn't stay."*

" *You told me yourself," Chikaru said in a soothing voice. "In the Universe Garden, remember? She said it was time to return to her true self. She has all of creation to watch over again. I'm sure she'd have stayed with you if she could."*

That had been her source of comfort in those first difficult days without Hatsumi: that her love had a higher purpose that was keeping her away. But now?

Hatsumi had left her duty to return to the mortal world again… but had not returned to Hazuki.

Hours passed while Hazuki sat at the base of Naoko's tree, numbed to the core with shock and anguish. At last, with darkness about to fall, she felt a gentle touch on her shoulder, and a welcome energy flowed through her, bringing her out of her stupor. "Hazuki-chan?"

She turned red-rimmed eyes to see Chikaru crouching beside her, the older girl's face filled with concern. She tried to say something, but her voice was long gone.

With a nod of understanding, Chikaru put her arms around Hazuki and held her as she collapsed into new tears.

Words did not come until much later, in the safety of Chikaru's dormitory room. There, Hazuki told Chikaru everything Aaya had said, from the possibility that she would have to leave to the idea that neither of them were mortal any longer.

"That does explain some things," Chikaru said quietly. "I always wondered why I didn't sleep as much after Naoko left. I liked to think it was because she had awakened me in some way."

"And the rest?"

"No feats of strength or agility to speak of, but as for the other… I'd say it's about once every ten or eleven months. My doctor could never explain it. That seems ironic, though, if the *Souma* is a force of creation."

"I'm getting tired of irony," Hazuki whispered, closing her eyes as she burrowed her face more deeply into Chikaru's shoulder.

"I'm sure there's a reason she couldn't come back," Chikaru whispered, stroking Hazuki's hair gently. "Maybe she couldn't be born into the same world a second time."

"But she told me she'd come back as my child one day."

"True, but maybe she didn't want to put you through that. Having to give birth to the one you were in love with? That would be a Greek tragedy in the worst way."

Hazuki very nearly laughed, more thankful than ever for Chikaru's sense of humor. This couldn't have been easy for her to hear either, but she seemed to be taking the idea of her own near-immortality with great aplomb.

"I don't know what to do now," Hazuki said at last. "I don't know how to… *be* what he said I am."

Chikaru kissed her on the top of the head. "I have a suggestion, if you're interested."

"Of course," Hazuki replied, scooting to one side so she could meet Chikaru's eyes.

"We'll go to classes on Monday, as we should. You'll keep making friends and staying out of Kaname-san's way, and I'll keep up with club activities and student council business. As we should."

Hazuki nodded, wondering if it could be that simple.

"Then," Chikaru went on, "you'll give me kendo lessons, *as we planned*, and I'll teach you meditation, *as we planned*, so that when the time comes, whether it's in that week or that hundred years, we'll *both* be ready, and we'll do this *together* ."

"Together?" Hazuki whispered.

"It looks like we're stuck with each other for a while," Chikaru smiled. "So yes, together."

Hazuki could only nod, as she could not find the strength to deny this simple truth. In spite of what they could never be, they were still stronger together, and it was comforting to know that however long

and difficult the path might now be, there would always be someone by her side.

"Now, though?" Chikaru continued. "Now, you should rest. We'll talk more about this tomorrow."

There was a change in the feel of their shared *Souma* with those words, and Hazuki felt the agony of the day draining away, leaving only exhaustion. She drifted to sleep, still in Chikaru's arms, with the comforting knowledge that she was not alone.

Next: Subtext

Subtext

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Well, at least I had an easy time coming up with a title for this chapter…

What makes me think I could start clean-slated?

The hardest to learn was the least complicated

-Indigo Girls

Part 6: Subtext

"Hazuki-chan!" Tamao called, picking up her stride to try to catch the dark-haired Spican before she could disappear into the sports complex. "Wait up!"

Turning at the sound of her name, Hazuki waved to Tamao and strode to meet her halfway. "Good afternoon, Tamao-chan."

"I was hoping to see you before you went to practice," Tamao smiled somewhat hesitantly. "I'm not making you late, am I?"

"Not at all. There's no team practice today: I'm meeting Chikaru in half an hour for some more lessons, and I want to run through some katas before I try to demonstrate them for someone else."

"Oh, w-well, don't let me keep you then," Tamao stammered.

Hazuki put her head to one side and regarded Tamao. "You wanted to ask me something, though?"

"No! I mean, not if you're busy; I wouldn't want to…"

"Tamao-chan," Hazuki interrupted, putting up one hand to stall her. "It's okay. I know I haven't been very good company in the dining hall for the last few days, and I'm sorry. I just had some… interesting family news over the weekend."

"Oh," Tamao replied. She had wondered about Hazuki's recent polite detachedness, but would not have guessed family issues. For a moment, curiosity won out over nervousness. "Is it… something you want to… talk about?"

"Well, *that* story *would* take a lot longer than I have," Hazuki said wryly. "But seriously, what can I do for you?"

Tamao felt a blush building up as she considered how to ask this. "Did you know that Shizuma-sama's coming to visit this weekend?"

"Yes, and even if I didn't, I could probably guess from the look of perpetual bliss Nagisa-chan's been wearing lately."

"Nagisa-chan's been very happy, yes," Tamao agreed. "The thing is, I had a chance to talk to Shizuma-sama briefly in private yesterday. She invited me to join them for dinner on Saturday evening, and… I was wondering… would you like to come with me? Er, with us?"

Hazuki blinked in apparent disbelief, then gave Tamao a bemused smile. "Tamao-chan, are you asking me out?"

With that, the blush came full-force. "No! I mean, not really, not like that! It's just that Shizuma-sama tries so hard to include me in most things -- though not everything, obviously --" The heat in her face intensified as she realized how that had sounded. "What I mean is, sometimes it's hard not to feel like a third wheel with them, even though they're both very good to share their time together with me, so I asked if I could maybe bring another person? To make things less… awkward?"

"Less awkward," Hazuki nodded.

"Yeah, I'm kind of failing at that right now, aren't I?" Tamao smiled sheepishly.

"Well, I don't know if this will help or not but… I've already been invited," Hazuki said gently. "Shizuma-sama called me as well, and asked if Chikaru and I would join you. I was wondering why she said there would be four of you, to be honest."

"Oh," Tamao said again, feeling embarrassed and more than a little disappointed. "I see. Well… at least I'll be a fifth wheel this time instead of a third wheel, I suppose…"

Hazuki looked around for a moment at the passers-by, then leaned in closer. "Tamao-chan, you're probably the only other person on this campus who knows Chikaru and I aren't really a couple," she reminded her. "And anyhow, I'll turn down the invitation if it would make things more comfortable for you."

"No, don't do that," Tamao said, shaking her head and forcing a smile. "That would be silly. No, I'm sure everything will be fine."

"We'll just have to make sure it will be, then," Hazuki nodded.

Searching for a way to wrap this up with minimal extra embarrassment, Tamao gave a brisk sigh. "Well, don't let me keep you from your katas. Tell Chikaru-sama I said hello."

"I will. And I'll see you at dinner tonight."

Hazuki turned to go, but Tamao felt a sudden flash of concern at Hazuki's earlier disclosure. "Hazuki-chan?"

"Yes?" Hazuki replied, stopping to look back.

"Is… everything okay?" Tamao asked, lamely.

"Mostly," Hazuki shrugged. "Maybe I'm feeling a little disappointed, is all."

Tamao frowned, wondering what her family could have done to evoke such a feeling. "Disappointed? Why?"

Hazuki resumed her path to the sports complex, but shot Tamao an odd smile over her shoulder before she got too far. "Because you weren't really asking me out."

The blush returned with a vengeance, but Hazuki was no longer there to see it.

One of the advantages of being a student council president was knowing where the extra keys were kept.

Not, Kaname reasoned as she closed the door to Azuma-kun's room behind her, that she wouldn't catch hell if someone were to find her here. She was not worried about the occupant herself, per se, who seemed to be making a ritual of these new afternoon spars with Minamoto-san, but if one of the Sisters should happen to see her entering or leaving? Kaname considered herself an excellent bluffer, but Sister Mizue in particular had eyes that could pierce right through any such attempts.

Maddeningly enough, she could not even put her finger on what had brought her here in the first place. Could Momomi actually be right about this? Was she obsessing again, this time more than ever? Or was this a legitimate case of needing to know the enemy?

Dismissing such thoughts as unproductive, Kaname took a quick scan of the small room, finding it at first glance incredibly ordinary. There were a few books and a small stereo on the hutch of the desk, the bed was neatly made and topped by set of blue flannel pajamas folded into a tight bundle at the foot end, and that sword of hers was hanging on the wall. It occurred to Kaname that the hilt was within easy reach from the bed itself, and she wondered if Azuma-kun kept it so close for a reason.

Then again, perhaps it would be better not to wonder such things.

A quick check of the wardrobe revealed almost nothing: very few casual clothes, spare uniforms, and interestingly enough, what appeared to be another school uniform hanging separate from the others. This one was standard sailor fuku: white top, fairly long blue skirt and red necktie.

Now why in the world would Azuma-kun have kept her old school uniform, and even brought it to her new school with her?

Carefully closing the wardrobe, Kaname moved on to the desk. There was an open textbook here, along with a tablet containing neatly written notes about the feudal era of Japan. Very ordinary, very student-like, very boring.

Then, she noticed something that brought a satisfied smile to her face. A thin black electrical cord snaked into a drawer left slightly ajar, and inside was a small black cellular phone. Very much against the rules, of course, though Kaname would have an interesting time trying to explain how she'd found this little piece of contraband. Still, it was potential ammunition for another time.

Curiosity getting the better of her, she took the phone out, flipped it open, and checked the address book, finding only two names. One was simply "Hatsumi," with no last name given, but it was the other that really drew Kaname's attention.

Why would this girl have Hanazono Shizuma as a contact? She'd been seen fraternizing with the former Etoile's little girlfriend and the love-struck roommate, admittedly, but there was something unsettling about the idea that Azuma-kun could be friends with a campus legend like Shizuma.

Moreover, why only two numbers? Did the girl have no friends or family besides Shizuma and whoever this Hatsumi was?

Still puzzling over this, Kaname reached to set the phone back in its drawer, but her fingers brushed something that gave her almost an

electric shock. She snatched her hand back with a quiet gasp of pain, then peered inside to see what it had been.

Resting there near the phone, but unnoticed on her first glance, was a small, positively ancient-looking red comb. It had no doubt been a thing of beauty once, and still showed signs of intricate carvings and even a few tiny jewels.

Eyes wide, breath suddenly very shallow, Kaname reached in and carefully closed her hand around the comb, feeling a strange shiver that started from her fingertips and ended at the base of her spine. She'd seen this comb before. It couldn't be Hazuki's: the few wisps of hair still wrapped around its teeth were not her shining black, but rather a soft golden color.

Then, with another almost physical shock, Kaname remembered.

After only a few days of practicing together in the privacy of one of the sparring rooms, Chikaru's strengths were quickly becoming apparent: while she was not picking up the sword work anywhere near as quickly as Hazuki, she was grace itself in the stance and movement drills, flowing from one position to the next with ridiculous ease and poise.

And it wasn't really fair to say that she was doing poorly with the practice swords: far from it, in fact. She had shown remarkable progress considering that her only prior experience with a blade was in stage and costume craft. Even coming in, she knew how to grip and carry, but beyond that it was all a learning process. She was a quick study to be sure, able to mimic Hazuki's iaido demonstrations with only a handful of repetitions each, but it did not seem to be coming as naturally to her as it had to Hazuki. She could repeat, but as yet had shown little ability to improvise, *Souma* notwithstanding.

"I have a theory about that," Chikaru said as they moved on to kenjutsu katas, with Chikaru as the attacker and Hazuki as the defender.

"Tell me," Hazuki replied, going through the dance-like motions of defense until Chikaru landed a gentle blow at the movement's conclusion. "Good, that was perfect."

"Thank you. I've been thinking about why the *Souma* affects us differently. Remind me, Hazuki-chan: what were your first thoughts after Hatsumi disappeared?"

Hazuki frowned. She had been trying not to think too much about Hatsumi since Aaya's news. "Just that I needed to find her. I didn't want to lose her."

"And then when Lilith's bird showed up, you threatened him with a knife until he agreed to bring you along to find her, right?" Chikaru got back into the initial stance, and they ran through the steps again.

"He was my only chance," said Hazuki as they completed the kata. "I wasn't about to let him leave me alone in that house with Hatsumi still out there somewhere."

"Very true. Now hear me out on this. Your first thoughts were to find Hatsumi, and you weren't afraid to resort to violence to do it." She held up one hand to forestall any protests. "I'm not making any sort of value judgment: just trying to see it as it was."

"No, that about sums it up," Hazuki nodded.

Chikaru smiled at her easy acceptance. "I think those first moments with the *Souma* inside you shaped the way it affected you. You were ready to fight your way back to her side, and it immediately started making you into the samurai I know and love. And since my experience was completely different from yours, I have a long road ahead to make myself the warrior you became with relative ease. Does that make sense?"

"I suppose," Hazuki considered. "But you're picking it up very well all the same."

"It's a shame you can't just sort of… *upload* it all to me," Chikaru laughed. "We share energy all the time, you and I. Too bad we can't use it to send technique."

"That *would* be handy," Hazuki agreed. "Maybe you could return the favor and send me a little extra serenity."

"We'll get to that when we start meditating together. I'm looking forward to it."

The conversation lapsed as they went though a few more repetitions. Maybe there *was* something to their connection, Hazuki reasoned, because the paired drills were actually going much better today. Maybe they were getting better at reading one another. There was no direct *Souma* link due to the lack of physical contact, but that didn't seem to hinder the push and pull of their sparring.

"So if your theory is correct," Hazuki asked as they paused for water, "what was the effect on you? What were you thinking when Naoko left?"

Chikaru smiled distantly, and Hazuki found that she envied her these good memories. "I was shocked, maybe a little sad, but mostly amazed. And as much as I knew that I'd miss her, it occurred to me even then that Astraea would miss her more. I found myself hoping that I could be even a fraction of what she was. I wanted to carry on her good work."

"Leading to your current status as the most level-headed person on this hill?" Hazuki smiled.

"I don't know if I'd put it *that* way," Chikaru grinned. "But it's been an honor to have people come to me for advice, they way they did her, and to be able to give comfort where I can, just as she did."

"Somehow I think you'll have a harder time teaching me *that* than I'm having teaching you to use a sword."

"Oh, I don't know about that. My network of spies tells me that Nagisa and Tamao have been much happier since they started spending time with you, so you're obviously doing *something* right."

Hazuki arched her eyebrows. "You have a network of spies?"

"Not by design," Chikaru grinned evilly. "But somehow, all the gossip finds its way to me eventually."

With a half-grin, Hazuki wondered how much of that network was simply Kizuna and Remon. She paused to take a drink from her water bottle, reflecting briefly on her experiences with the two Miator fifth-years. "What do you think of Tamao?" she asked at length.

"I adore her," Chikaru said without hesitation. "She's one of the most loyal, caring people I've had the privilege to know. Far stronger than she thinks she is. A few interesting quirks, but then, who among us doesn't have those?"

"Who indeed," Hazuki nodded ruefully.

"Why do you ask?" Chikaru asked, taking another drink.

Hazuki frowned, still not certain herself. "I saw her about an hour ago, and… I'm pretty sure I flirted with her."

Chikaru missed a colossal spit-take by a mere fraction of a second, but as it was, she nearly choked on her water. "Wait a moment, let me write down the date. You *flirted* with someone?"

"Hey, I flirt with *you* all the time!" Hazuki protested.

"Yes, but I'm safe! What did you say to her?"

"Well… she asked me if I'd come to Shizuma-sama's dinner with her; she didn't know you and I were already coming. I asked if she were asking me out, and she said no, so later I said I was a little disappointed that it wasn't really that. Only it sounded a little more flirty than the way I'm explaining it."

Chikaru smirked. "Out of practice?"

"That would imply that I've *had* practice," Hazuki sighed. "Other than with Safe-sama."

In a softer voice, Chikaru asked "So… what are your intentions *here?* "

Hazuki shook her head. "I… still don't have any. It felt… natural enough to say that to her, but I'm still pretty wrecked inside."

"That's okay," Chikaru assured her, making the effortless transition from teasing friend to wise counsel. "You've been though things that make everyday heartbreak pale by comparison. Are you still thinking about her often? Hatsumi, I mean?"

"More often than I'd like," Hazuki admitted. "But it all keeps coming back to the same thing. She so much as told me that no one in all the worlds had ever loved her as much as I had, but if that's true, then… why did she leave and not come to me?"

Chikaru took Hazuki's hand and gave it a familiar squeeze. "As much as I'd love to say something profound about not questioning the ways of angels, I can't. I wish I could tell you. And who knows, maybe someday you'll have the chance to ask…"

"No," Hazuki interrupted. "I mean… I don't know that I want that anymore. Maybe it's better not to know. You told me months ago that sometimes loving something means letting go, remember?"

There was a long pause, and then Chikaru let out a small sigh. "Tamao-chan isn't the only one who's stronger than she knows," she whispered.

"Thank you. I didn't say I *had* let go, though."

"All things with time and practice, my darling."

She was sitting in her usual place in one of the gazebos outside the dormitory. Nothing short of torrential rain kept her from spending part of the afternoon there, either reading, sitting with moon-eyed admirers, or just lazily combing her hair, the way she was now.

Kaname watched her from a distance, still nervous about approaching. In her first few months she had heard all the legends of Minamoto Naoko, of course: a silent beauty who spoke only with her eyes and hands, desired by many and yet attached to none, an inspiration to all who sought love in spite of themselves. Even the Etoile came seeking her wisdom. Hell, some girls whispered that even the Sisters came to her for advice, as ridiculous as that sounded.

And who was she? A tiny third-year from that joke of a sister school.

Speaking of sisters, though, at least that wide-eyed moppet Chikaru wasn't hanging off of her today. Kaname couldn't count the number of times she had gathered the nerve to come find Naoko-sama, only to find her in this very gazebo with little sister's head in her lap.

Still nervous, but determined to finally see what all the fuss was about, Kaname approached, and quietly stepped under the shade of the gazebo. "Hello?" she called.

Naoko-sama looked up at her and smiled gently.

" *Are you -- busy?" Kaname asked, trying to fill the silence.*

With a shake of the head, Naoko-sama patted a spot on the bench close by. Kaname sat gingerly, then turned to see the tiny blonde staring at her with those odd eyes, so light brown as to seem almost red.

" *I'm… Kenjyo Kaname. This is my first year here."*

Naoko-sama nodded, then set her comb down and made a few rapid gestures with both hands.

" I'm sorry, I don't understand," Kaname grimaced. Was she going to have to learn sign language to get the wise guru's advice? Nobody had mentioned that part.

The older girl nodded, clasping her hands before her. She watched Kaname with an open, inviting expression on her face, and Kaname realized that Naoko-sama was waiting for the young Spican to speak further.

" I suppose I was just wondering who you were," Kaname shrugged, suddenly feeling very silly to have come here. "I've heard some incredible things about how you… help people understand themselves better. Are you just… a good listener, maybe?"

Naoko-sama smiled warmly, then reached for one of Kaname's hands. To the young Spican's surprise, the hand which grasped hers was very warm, and almost seemed to be humming, as though vibrating just slightly.

After studying the lines on Kaname's palm for a moment, Naoko-sama clasped the hand in both of hers and brought it palm-first to her chest, pressing it just over her heart.

Kaname was shocked at the gesture, and for a moment wanted to pull her hand away, but then she caught Naoko-sama's eyes again, and the thought came that this was nothing to be afraid of. Somehow she knew that this was nothing more than Naoko-sama's way of getting to know her better.

The longer she stared into those bizarre eyes, though, and the longer she felt that heartbeat against her hand, the more Kaname's apprehension grew. Naoko-sama seemed to look right into her darkest places, and Kaname found herself laid bare before that gentle, unassuming curiosity. Every shame, every dirty secret, every memory she tried to deny: none of it was safe from those eyes.

But then she felt something else: a liquid warmth that swirled around the cold inside her, a green like new leaves, and a promise of

wholeness that Kaname never dared believe could be hers.

Suddenly terrified by the intimacy of the contact and the rousing of her own demons, Kaname snatched back her hand and turned her face away to break the pull of Naoko-sama's eyes. She gasped involuntarily as the world flashed back into place around her.

" *I… have to go…" she panted, getting shakily to her feet and running from the gazebo, not daring to look back.*

It was not until much later that she began to wonder what would have happened had she stayed.

Tears streaming down her cheeks, Kaname let the comb fall from her nerveless fingers into the open drawer, then pushed herself away from Azuma-kun's desk, all but trembling at the memory of that day's confrontation with her greatest shame.

Her already questionable reasons for coming here quickly forgotten, Kaname hurriedly tried to put everything back the way she'd found it, then so much as fled the room, vowing never to return.

Next: Reunion

Reunion

The best thing you've ever done for me

Is to help me take my life less seriously

It's only life after all

-Indigo Girls

Part 7: Reunion

When Tamao returned to the dormitory room she shared with Nagisa, she was a bit surprised to have her roommate all but pounce on her. "You didn't tell me! You little *sneak*, Tamao-chan!"

"What are you talking about, Nagisa-chan?" Tamao replied, sitting up on her bed and meeting Nagisa's wide-eyed expression of manic glee.

Nagisa struck a formal pose. "Hanazono, party of *six*, your table is ready." The grin then returned in earnest. "Hmm, that's an *even* number. Why's *that*, Tamao-chan?"

"Wait a minute," Tamao frowned. "Party of -- you mean, you knew Hazuki-chan and Chikaru-sama were invited?"

"Well, yes, of course! Didn't Shizuma tell you?"

Tamao sighed. "It must have slipped her mind."

"But that's okay, isn't it? I mean, we can do something later with just the three of us if…"

"No, it's fine, Nagisa-chan," Tamao assured her. "I'll be happy to see them both there."

"Along with someone *else*, I imagine," Nagisa grinned again, hopping up next to Tamao on the bed. "And when were you going to *tell* me, miss Party of Six?"

"Nagisa-chan…"

"Tamao-oooooo has a da-aaaaate!" Nagisa said in a singsong voice, then to Tamao's surprise, flomped down into her lap and looked up at her. "So spill. Who's the lucky girl?"

"Nagisa-chan…"

"No, no, let me guess! Umm… is it… Yaya-chan? No, I don't think Tsubomi-chan would like that. Is it… Chiyo-chan? That would be so cute! I miss having her as our room temp. We really *should* spend more time with her…"

"Nagisa-chan!" Tamao repeated, raising her voice a little this time. As aggravated as Tamao was, though, there was something ridiculously cute about the way Nagisa was carrying on.

"No, you're right, too young," Nagisa nodded. She then popped back up and reached over to grab Tamao's shoulder, eyes going wide. "Oh! Of course! It must be--"

"It's *nobody*, Nagisa-chan," Tamao interrupted. "I don't have a date. Please tell Shizuma-sama that it will only be a party of five."

While her eyes remained wide, Nagisa's features slowly fell. "Oh, Tamao-chan… I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry, it's fine. I'm sure I'll still have a good time."

In the space of mere seconds, Nagisa's face twisted from dismay to sadness and then straight into indignation. "Someone had the nerve to turn down *my* Tamao-chan?"

"No, it wasn't like that…"

"Tell me who it was. I need to exact terrible revenge on her family for generations to come." She said the last with a smirk to show that she was (probably) kidding.

This, finally, got Tamao to smile. It amused her how their roles had changed this year, particularly since Nagisa and Shizuma had been in regular contact again. Suddenly Nagisa was the confident, even gently flirtatious one while Tamao had become the one more prone to bouts of shyness and even occasional melancholy. But now was not the time for that: not while Nagisa was making such an effort. "It was nobody's fault, Nagisa-chan. It was a misunderstanding. I asked someone I shouldn't have asked."

"Shouldn't have asked?" Nagisa repeated, giving Tamao a puzzled look. "Who *was* it?"

Tamao looked away. "I… asked Hazuki-chan."

After a long pause, Nagisa said "Oh…"

After a longer pause, Nagisa said "I see…"

After a still longer pause, Nagisa said "Um, Tamao-chan?"

"Yes?"

"She's… *taken* . I mean, you *must* know that, right?"

In fact, Tamao knew otherwise, but she did not feel it was her place to tell Nagisa so. "I didn't mean to ask it like a date," she said, feeling the reminder of a blush at the memory of Hazuki's professed disappointment. Had that been real?

"Does Tamao-chan… *like* Hazuki-chan in that way?" Nagisa asked softly.

"I don't know," Tamao sighed. "I like talking to her over tea. It makes me happy to see her smile, and I don't think she does it often enough. I don't know if there's more to it, though." She slipped a teasing grin into place. "Besides, after Nagisa-chan has been in your heart, no one else can even come close."

Unfortunately, the joke appeared to miss its mark, as Nagisa's face fell yet again. "Tamao-chan, that's not fair."

"I'm sorry, Nagisa-chan; I shouldn't have teased you like that."

"No, it's not fair to *you*," Nagisa insisted, suddenly looking positively wretched. "Nobody knows better than I do that I broke Tamao-chan's heart, and the *last* thing I want is to see it get broken again. It's not fair."

Tamao looked Nagisa in the eye and laid one hand over hers, suddenly back in the role of the reassuring friend. "I'll be careful."

"I still can't believe it. A body like yours, and you don't own a dress? Criminal, really."

Hazuki frowned into the mirror as Chikaru continued busying herself with the dress she had forced Hazuki to try on, adjusting here and tucking there. "I don't have much call to dress up in my life. I'm more of a sweaters and jeans girl."

"Oh, don't get me wrong, you look fantastic in those too," Chikaru said from the vicinity of Hazuki's ankles. "But not even *one* dress?"

"Are you sure I'll need one for this dinner?"

"Trust me. If Shizuma-sama is picking the restaurant, you'll want something more than a sweater and jeans." Seemingly satisfied with her work, Chikaru stood beside Hazuki and looked into the mirror with her. "And this will only take the tiniest of adjustments, really. We're remarkably close to the same build, you and I: you just have

far more leg. But I always leave plenty of extra in the hem in case I want to drop it later. Different occasions, different skirt lengths."

"Wait, you made this dress, too?" Hazuki asked, looking herself over again. It was mostly black, with a close-fitting bodice, a knee-length (on her) skirt, loose sleeves, and just a bit of white lace around the front of the scoop-neck collar.

"It's what I do with some of those hours that I don't need to sleep anymore," Chikaru winked. "Do you like this one? It'll only take minimal alterations, so I can have it ready well before Saturday evening."

Hazuki had to admit that she liked the way it looked on her, as alien as it was. "It's nice, but… you don't have to do that."

Still admiring their reflection in the full-length looking glass, Chikaru leaned in and gave Hazuki a one-armed hug. "Here's a tip. If we're going to be functionally immortal together, you'd better get used to having me dress you up now and then."

Momomi opened the door to St. Spica's student council office, finding Kaname inside, poring over a series of printouts. "And what fascinating reading is that?" she asked, amused at the uncharacteristic look of concentration.

"Weapon and firearm restrictions," Kaname said, not looking up from her reading.

"Well," Momomi smiled, sitting herself in the chair on the opposite side of the presidential desk. "I can see that the next council meeting is going to be interesting. Planning to give Miator a memorable rebuttal?"

"This isn't for council business," Kaname muttered.

With a sigh, Momomi frowned at her lover. "Let me guess. It's about Azuma-kun, isn't it?"

Kaname set the papers down on her desk and gave Momomi a frighteningly intent look. "I want her out of this school, Momomi. The sooner the better."

Eyebrows raised, Momomi nodded slowly. "Well, if whatever you've got in mind will get you to stop obsessing over her, I'd have to say I'm in favor of it."

Hanazono Shizuma stepped from the limousine door to look up at the familiar front steps of the Strawberry dormitory, feeling in some ways as though she'd never left this home of six years. She barely had the time for a single wistful sigh, however, before Nagisa charged down said steps and practically bowled her over in greeting.

Laughing delightedly, Shizuma swept the smaller girl up in an embrace, raining kisses on that face she'd missed so much through the beginning of her time at university. Nagisa was wearing a lovely strapless green gown which Shizuma had never seen before, and had her hair down from its customary topknot so that it fell across her pale shoulders. She'd never looked more beautiful.

"Well, someone's happy to see *someone*, I daresay," another voice laughed musically.

Shizuma looked up and smiled at the remaining three ladies, throwing a wink to the one who had spoken. "Indeed, Chikaru-chan." Releasing Nagisa for the moment, she greeted the Lulim president with a kiss on the cheek. Chikaru had chosen red for the evening, her ankle-length dress and long gloves matching the ever-present bows in her raven hair.

Next came Tamao, whom Shizuma also greeted with a warm embrace. Tamao was wearing a relatively conservative dark-blue

dress that shimmered ever so slightly as she moved. "Good evening, Tamao-chan."

"It's so good to see you again," Tamao smiled, looking from Shizuma to Nagisa. Ever the best friend, she was obviously happier for Nagisa's sake than anything else.

"And you remember Hazuki-chan, of course?" Chikaru smiled, indicating the last of them.

"Hanazono-sama," Hazuki said with a low bow.

"Oh, you stop that right there, Hazuki-chan," Shizuma chuckled at the polite gesture. "We're meeting as friends now. Everyone inside, then?"

The five ladies settled into the wide back seats of the limousine, and Shizuma gave the driver the signal to depart. Shizuma, Nagisa and Tamao (with Nagisa in the middle, of course) occupied one of the facing seats, while Chikaru and Hazuki sat opposite them. Soon the car was filled with warm, happy conversation and reminiscences of the previous term.

As much as she was enjoying the presence of the petite figure cuddled against her, Shizuma kept finding her attention drawn back to Tamao, wondering how she was getting along. When Nagisa had told her the news that Tamao would not be accompanied after all, Shizuma found that it bothered her more than she ever would have expected, but then, she had also never anticipated how dear to both of them Tamao would eventually become. She had genuinely hoped for happiness for her former rival, who deserved it as much as anyone.

More disturbing were the details, or at least the ones Nagisa had felt at liberty to give. She had not named any names, as she did not want to betray her friend's trust, but she had told Shizuma enough: that Tamao might again be setting herself up for heartbreak, this time by pinning her hopes on a heart that was already given.

Hazuki, in the meantime, was unexpectedly quiet, and Shizuma wondered if she felt out of place in this small crowd. She was certainly proving enigmatic: while she had not been at all shy about calling Shizuma to plan the webcam meetings for Nagisa, in person she appeared to be quite a bit more reserved, if not intimidated. Shizuma noted that she and Chikaru were holding hands, though, and this brought a smile to her face.

Chikaru, eh? The one who used to joke that she'd be the first ever to graduate from an Astraea school without being kissed? The only girl Shizuma had ever tried to flirt with and suddenly found herself *not* the one in control? The insufferably cute little sister turned font of wisdom who gleefully refused to get involved on any level, be it romantic or political? Something had changed there, obviously, and this so-called family friend holding her hand was no doubt right at the heart of it.

A table was waiting when they arrived at their destination, and the five ladies seated themselves with Chikaru and Hazuki to Shizuma's left and Nagisa and Tamao to her right. She was glad the restaurant had been able to fulfill her request for a circular table: there would be no hiding in corners at *this* dinner.

"I'm so glad you could join us," she smiled, eyes passing over Chikaru and Hazuki, then lingering as she saw the tall Spican share a smile with Tamao. "Choose whatever you like. Nothing but the best for my friends tonight."

"Thank you very much for your kindness, Shizuma," Chikaru nodded to her. "Though I must admit, as fond as I am of you, I'm a bit surprised to have been asked to such a… personal gathering as this."

Shizuma tipped her head in Hazuki's direction. "I wanted the chance to thank our new friend Hazuki-chan for being so kind to Nagisa, and I couldn't very well invite her without inviting you, now could I?"

Chikaru smiled happily at Shizuma. "Again, that's very kind of you, dear Shizuma, but why not? It's not as though Hazuki and I are a couple, after all."

Beside her, Nagisa actually let out a tiny gasp, and Shizuma found herself blinking at the Lulim president in surprise. Hazuki, for her part, was saying nothing: simply looking at Chikaru with eyebrows raised slightly.

"I'm surprised at you, Chikaru," Shizuma said at length. "I've never known you to be coy like this. We're all friends here: there's no need to be shy about anything."

"I'm not being coy *or* shy: we're just not a couple. Can't a girl hold hands with her dear friend anymore without it being misconstrued?"

"And before anyone asks," Hazuki put in, looking specifically at an aghast Nagisa as she said this, "no, we haven't broken up, and no, there isn't anything wrong. We've never *been* a couple."

"That's not what I've heard," Shizuma said, doubtfully. "Word has it that you two are the picture-perfect pair."

"Ah, Shizuma," Chikaru said with a small chuckle. "I thought you knew better than to trust the rumor mill implicitly."

"Chikaru, darling, you *are* the rumor mill."

"No, I'm not. I'm simply at its center. There is a difference."

"So you're *really* not… involved?" Shizuma asked, looking from Chikaru to Hazuki with a puzzled smile.

"Oh, come now, Shizuma," Chikaru winked at her. "After all this time, I thought you knew me better than that."

"Yes, I thought so, too!" Shizuma laughed. "Well, this *does* explain some things. When I heard otherwise, I could only assume that our

new friend Hazuki-chan must have been, ahem, very *talented* in… certain arts."

"Oh, she is, make no mistake," Chikaru nodded.

Nagisa nearly choked on her water, and Tamao turned bright scarlet.

"She's taught me a great many things," Chikaru went on. "Technique, mostly, but we're working on stamina now as well."

"Really?" Shizuma asked, patting Nagisa gently between the shoulder blades as the young redhead sputtered.

"Oh yes, she's quite the sensei. The way we can move together now? It's nothing short of amazing."

There was a long pause, broken only by Nagisa's continued coughing.

Chikaru sighed happily. "But enough about kendo. Let's see what's on the menu, shall we?"

By this time, Nagisa had recovered sufficiently to articulate her surprise. "But- but you're so cute together!" She then turned a wide-eyed glance to Tamao and amended herself. "I mean, not that Tamao-chan wouldn't be cute with Hazuki-chan too, but…"

" *Nagisa!"* Tamao yelped, even as Shizuma's eyebrows climbed way up into her silver mane.

Barreling on ahead in spite of her roommate's protest, Nagisa looked at Hazuki while gesturing vaguely toward Chikaru. "And you have a picture of her from when she played Carmen as the wallpaper of your laptop!"

"It's a nice picture!" Hazuki retorted, defensively.

"You do?" Chikaru smiled. "That's so sweet, Hazuki-chan!"

"It's a nice picture," Hazuki said again, this time in a grumble.

Shizuma's subsequent smile was wide and full of mischief. "Yes, I have good memories of that dress. Though I must say, Chikaru, you were only the second-loveliest girl to wear it that night."

"As you like," Chikaru smiled, raising her water glass toward Shizuma before taking a drink.

Turning new eyes on her companions, Shizuma took a moment to re-assess. Chikaru appeared to be having the time of her life, Hazuki was heading into surly (but she cracked a smile as Chikaru leaned in and said "I'm going to pay for this later, aren't I?"), Nagisa was still looking from girl to girl in an obvious state of denial, and Tamao looked as though she wanted the ground to open up beneath her, and was making a point not to look anywhere near the dark-haired Spican seated to her right.

Suddenly, Nagisa's comments clicked into place, both the earlier concern that Tamao might be setting herself up for heartbreak again, and the more recent, seemingly random exclamation about potential cuteness.

Tamao and Hazuki, eh?

Shizuma took a drink to hide her smile. This dinner had the potential to be more fun than she could ever have hoped.

Tamao took a series of deep breaths, then looked at herself again in the washroom mirror. At least the tears had been brief, and she'd probably made it a safe distance from the table before they'd started. Best to get her brave face back on before someone came looking for her.

Even as she thought this, though, the door opened, and an unexpected face peeked in. "Tamao-chan?"

"I'm fine," she said automatically as Chikaru stepped inside and joined her at the ornate sink. "I just needed a few moments."

"I'm very sorry, Tamao-chan," Chikaru said softly. "Had I known how far Shizuma-sama would run with things, I wouldn't have even brought it up."

"It's alright," Tamao sighed. "How were you to know she'd start suggesting I take private 'kendo' lessons as well?"

"She knows she crossed the line, for what it's worth," Chikaru assured her. "She was going to come after you herself, but I thought it best that I come instead. A few moments alone with Hazuki-chan in full Glare Mode should quell any further mischief."

Tamao gave a small laugh at the thought of Hazuki pinning the other two down with that glare. "I'll come back out now."

"Mmm, let's let them have a little longer," Chikaru grinned, and Tamao couldn't help but smile with her. "But you know that she means well, I hope."

"Of course she does," Tamao muttered, feeling a surge of the bitterness she'd tried so hard to suppress. "I'm sure she and Nagisa both would love to push me into someone's arms. Maybe then they could stop acting so guilty around me all the time."

"You know better than that," Chikaru said evenly.

Tamao put her hands over her eyes and took another deep breath. "Yes, I do. They both want me to be happy. I just don't know that I can stomach them playing matchmaker."

After a thoughtful pause, Chikaru caught Tamao's eye in the mirror. "As an interested party, you might say, I *do* need to ask you something, Tamao-chan."

"What is it?"

"What are your… intentions toward Hazuki-chan?"

Tamao rolled her eyes and let out a frustrated sigh. "I don't *know* . I… I just like talking to her. She's not like anyone I've ever met before. But why is everyone so sure that there's something there when I don't even know what it is?"

"It's what we do," Chikaru shrugged. "We want what's best for the ones dearest to us. We want them to be happy, and so we sometimes… *invent* happiness."

When Tamao did not reply, Chikaru went on. "I know what you went through with Nagisa-chan. I remember holding you while you cried the night after the Etoile election."

"I'm grateful you were there," Tamao said with a tiny smile. "I cried all over again after Nagisa-chan came back."

"You should probably know, though," Chikaru said carefully, "that you've hardly got the patent on heartbreak. Hazuki-chan has been through quite a bit as well. A relationship, even a friendship, needs more than just mutual hurt at its base. So for both of your sakes, I would only ask that you be careful, and I'll tell her the same."

Tamao nodded, remembering the other day, when she'd told Nagisa the same thing. "I will be."

"Good," Chikaru smiled. "I promise I won't meddle -- well, much anyway -- but there *is* one last thing I should warn you about…"

"Oh?"

The smile deepened. "If something *should* spark between the two of you, and you should become serious, I hope you can handle having *me* around, because I don't plan to go anywhere."

Tamao laughed, once again reminded of her own evolving feelings toward Nagisa. "You know, Hazuki once told me you're the most

important person in this world to her."

"And I feel the same about her."

"How is it that the two of you aren't… in love?"

Chikaru shrugged and rolled her eyes. "Well, I *do* have that whole Not Being Attracted To Girls thing working against me, I'm afraid."

Tamao blinked a few times at the disclosure. "You're… you're not?"

"Sometimes I truly love Astraea," Chikaru giggled, seemingly addressing the comment to an unseen audience.

"But… Chikaru-sama, it's obvious how close the two of you are. Even if everything went perfectly, how could I ever hope to… compete with what you have?"

Giving a patient sigh, Chikaru enfolded Tamao in a brief hug. "You wouldn't *need* to, Tamao-chan."

After the brief interruption (and subsequent apology from Shizuma), the rest of the dinner passed remarkably well, Hazuki thought. Much of the conversation consisted of Chikaru holding court, catching Shizuma up on the news from the school to an extent even Nagisa's web-calls had not. When the inevitable subject of Kaname and her meddling came up, Hazuki did her best to pooh-pooh any animosity, saying that she was sure the hostilities between her class president and herself would blow over soon, even assuming they had not already.

Once sated with dinner, dessert and conversation, Shizuma phoned her driver, and the five returned soon after to the waiting limousine. Hazuki, Chikaru and Tamao were dropped off at the dormitory amidst hugs and good-nights, while Shizuma and Nagisa continued on to spend the rest of the weekend at Shizuma's summer house to "exorcise some demons." Hazuki was curious at this choice of

euphemism, but thought it best not to question what the pair might enjoy with their private time.

With the remaining three unwilling to call it a night just yet, the evening ended, as so many of Hazuki's had thus far, in Chikaru's room (after a brief detour to pick up pajamas), where the stories continued well into the wee hours. Chikaru, as it turned out, had the perfect antidote to Tamao's earlier discomfort in the form of several embarrassing interludes about Shizuma's pre-Etoile days. Hazuki had the chance to recount her harrowing misadventure with Momomi (though with fewer of the accompanying ribald jokes), a story which unexpectedly had Tamao simply rolling with laughter. Eager to join in the fun, Tamao shared some tales about some of Nagisa's cutely clueless moments in their year-and-change as roommates. Hazuki found herself quite impressed by the way Tamao balanced the humor with her obvious affection for the girl, never allowing herself to be catty or mean-spirited.

It wasn't until much later, with all three of them lounging on Chikaru's bed and listening to another of her tales, that Hazuki noticed Tamao had dozed off between them. She caught Chikaru's eye and held one finger to her smiling lips.

"I like her," Chikaru whispered mischievously. "Can we keep her?"

"I think Nagisa might get jealous," Hazuki grinned.

"Meh, Nagisa and Shizuma had their chance for a threesome. I say we keep her."

"Chikaru!" Hazuki hissed.

"For being my stoic samurai, it's so easy to make you blush sometimes," Chikaru winked.

She reached one hand across a sleeping Tamao to clasp Hazuki's, and with the *Souma* continuing the exchange where their words had

left off, they allowed themselves to doze as well, Tamao held securely and peacefully between them.

Next: Meditation

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Thanks to Ninemil for once again being awesome.

Meditation

The cries of passion were like wounds that needed healing

I couldn't hear them for the thunder

I was half the naked distance between Hell and Heaven's ceiling

And he almost pulled me under

-Indigo Girls

Part 8: Meditation

"Remon-chan?"

"Hrm?"

"Are you awake?"

Remon opened her eyes. Of course, with the overhead light off and her glasses on her bedside table, this just meant the world was a dark blur with depth rather than the normal dark blur of the insides of her eyelids. "Yes, Kizuna-chan," she yawned. "In spite of *both of us* having early classes tomorrow, I'm awake."

"I was just thinking."

"I've warned you about that, you know."

Ignoring the jibe, Kizuna continued. "Do you ever wonder about Chikaru-onee-sama and Hazuki-sama?"

"Wonder… what?"

Kizuna's voice took on a decidedly sneaky tone. "Well… do you ever wonder which one of them is the *seme*, and which one's the *uke* ? Who's the dominant one when they… you know?"

Remon paused for a long while. "This is seriously what you were thinking about?"

"Oh, come on! You know you've wondered the same thing!"

"Okay, let's go down the list," Remon sighed. "You've got Hazuki-sama. She's ridiculously tall, strong and athletic. Fairly low-pitched voice. Wears pants when she's not in uniform. Knows how to use a sword."

"All true."

"Then you've got Chikaru-onee-sama. Very feminine, very nurturing, likes to dress up, hugely creative, and everyone's best friend and understanding sister."

"Also all true. So which one of them is the dominant one in bed?"

Remon pondered this for all of a fraction of a second. "Chikaru-onee-sama, of course."

"Yeah, definitely Chikaru-onee-sama."

"Hazuki-sama would never have a chance, really."

"No question."

"You're doing fine," Chikaru assured Hazuki.

The two were kneeling opposite one another on a soft mat spread over the tiny amount of floor in Chikaru's room, eyes closed, faces placid. Each girl held her hands out at shoulder level, palm to palm with the other's. Their breathing was even and quiet, and other than

the motions of breathing and speaking, neither of them so much as twitched.

That was how it looked on the outside, anyway. As Hazuki was quickly discovering, though, Chikaru's method of meditating with *Souma* was something entirely different in the mind's eye.

Chikaru had guided her to this state of self-awareness through a series of breathing exercises accompanied by visualization. Though her eyes were closed, Hazuki could perceive the shape of her own body by the green glow of the power inside her, and by touching Chikaru, she could "see" her as well. From this perspective, their bodies were like crystal shells, the *Souma* blazing from within and casting thousands of tiny moving pinpoints of light onto their translucent outlines. Many of these motes of light converged where their hands touched, but as yet, there was none of their customary sharing of energy.

It was a beautiful way to imagine it, Hazuki thought: to her the *Souma* had always felt like rushing water, but it was easy enough to visualize these tiny lights instead. Chikaru's voice, by painting this picture in her mind, had guided her to a lovely place indeed.

"This is a little strange," Hazuki said quietly, her voice sounding distant in this altered perception. "Usually when we touch, it starts flowing between us right away."

"Yes, but this time I'm holding back," Chikaru replied. "I want you to try to start the exchange between us."

"I thought it sort of happened on its own."

"Hmm, sort of, yes. I have a theory about that, too."

"I'm not surprised," Hazuki said, feeling the tiniest smile reach her face.

"You tend to internalize your power," Chikaru explained, "and I don't. I don't think either of us is doing it *wrong*, mind you: I just think it all ties in with what we subconsciously wanted to use it for when it came to us. Think of it as pushing and pulling, where I naturally push, and you naturally pull. That's why we sparked when we touched hands for the first time, and that's why we normally start exchanging right away when we touch now."

"What do I need to do, then?"

"Pass through the boundary between us with your energy."

Hazuki took another centering breath and focused her attention on the scores of tiny lights coursing over her hands. Gradually, she brought her full attention to a single one of them, and tried to push it away from herself. From this point of view, even though she and Chikaru were touching, there was the tiniest barrier between them, thin and pliable like the surface of a soap bubble. As she tried to push through it, though, it kept snapping back to its original shape.

"It's harder than it sounds," Hazuki whispered.

"You're accustomed to holding things in," Chikaru reminded her. "The barrier you're feeling is of your own making, and that's to be expected, except… yours only works one way. You've set it up to keep everything inside, but not to prevent anything else from getting in. Now, Hazuki-chan… do you trust me?"

"With my life," Hazuki said immediately.

"Then trust me with what's inside you."

"I do. We share energy every day."

"Then trust me enough to take the first step yourself," Chikaru insisted.

Hazuki again tried to focus on a particle of energy and move it past that barrier, but again, it stretched and did not break. Slowly, it dawned on her that Chikaru was absolutely right about this, as usual. She was lacking trust, but in *herself*, not the world outside. Each of the hundreds of times they'd touched, she'd only released her own *Souma* after first feeling that shining presence inside her. Now, however, that welcoming energy was held beyond her reach, and she wanted it back again, even if she had to go to it rather than wait for it to come to her.

And just like that, it started. First a single mote fluttered across to rest upon the surface of Chikaru's shell, then another, and then dozens more, pouring over her crystalline skin to eventually be drawn back toward the green sun at her center. At the same time, a flurry of sparks crossed the other way, spreading through her and filling her with warmth.

"Wow," Hazuki whispered, watching the lights dance as they swirled past one another.

"Nice, isn't it?" Chikaru agreed.

"It's a lot more… intense, seeing it on this level."

"We can stop now if it's too much. You've come so far already."

"No, I'm… okay. That was just… different."

"That's because you were letting go," Chikaru smiled. "One of the hardest things for anyone to do."

"Good. Then since I've already done the impossible tonight, what's next?"

Chikaru did not laugh out loud, but across the distance between them, Hazuki fancied she could see that star pulse with merriment a few times. "Very well. Next visualization exercise. Your source is there at your heart, and the lights are playing across the surface of

your crystal skin, but there is far more to it than you see now. You're not hollow, after all. There are sparks flying through your shell, to and from your surface, to and from your core. Now that we're sharing again, I can follow the flow of your energy as it passes through me. Can you see mine?"

"Yes," Hazuki whispered, opening her mind to her friend's words. It was easy to perceive, really: Chikaru's energy was indeed flowing into the empty spaces inside her, mingling with her own. This reminded her of something she'd felt before, though, and a question bubbled through her consciousness, causing the lights inside to flicker. "There's something I've been wondering."

"Whatever it is, it's making you lose focus. Come back to me."

"Sorry."

"That's better. Now, tell me."

"When I came back to this world, Eve took the *Souma* from me before she left. When I came back to you, yours just… rushed into me, and I figured you had just shared yours with me, like I was being exposed to it all over again. But then Aaya said something different: he said you'd *reawakened* my *Souma*, not that you'd given me part of your own."

"It certainly never felt like you took anything from me, if that's what you're wondering. In fact, the longer we spend together, the stronger it feels, as though we're helping one another generate more."

"Aaya said something like that, too: that reawakening mine had strengthened yours."

"Stronger together," Chikaru reminded her. "Which is sort of the point to these exercises, ne?"

"I guess I still don't understand how there was something of mine to reawaken, and why it's still… *mine*, and not more like yours."

"Mmm, perhaps we'll discover that if we dig a little deeper?"

"What did you have in mind?"

Hazuki felt, rather than heard, as Chikaru took another deep breath, so she did the same, letting it out slowly as she refocused on the picture inside her, with the *Souma* flitting through her crystal shell like innumerable fireflies.

"Now then," Chikaru went on, resuming the soft, steady voice she used for these exercises, "each of those lights inside you is coming *from* somewhere, and going *to* somewhere. It's not unlike blood flowing through your veins and arteries. If you watch carefully, you'll start to see paths. Let each of the sparks leave a little trail of light behind it as it moves, and you'll start to see them connect. Consider these paths your own personal ley lines. You may have studied about the flow of the body's energies in martial arts, and this is like that."

With each word spoken, the picture grew more clear, and Hazuki found herself impressed all over again with Chikaru's ability to maintain her own meditation even as she guided a three-day amateur like Hazuki through hers. Soon, Hazuki found herself filled with what looked like the most delicate and intricate of spiderwebs, each strand made of pure emerald light, with the individual motes of Souma flowing along them effortlessly to and from her source, through her entire being, and into that of her companion.

"Eve may have taken *energy* from you when she left," Chikaru went on, "but all of this was still here, otherwise my touching you wouldn't have done a thing. It's like your pilot light never went out. I don't think the capacity to hold *Souma* ever left you, and I think Eve knew that. That was why she nudged you back to me with those strawberry hotcakes she left you."

"Why take it from me in the first place, then, if she intended for me to get it back?"

"Probably a loophole in a cosmic law of some kind," Chikaru smiled faintly, her humor dulled somewhat by her relaxed bearing.

They continued on in silence for a while, as Hazuki continued to focus on the flow of the *Souma*, and the patterns it drew as it moved. She gradually became aware that Chikaru, from that vast distance, was studying her more intently. "What is it?"

"I wonder…" Chikaru began.

"Tell me."

"I wonder if she really took it all away from you," Chikaru mused. "There's something about your source that feels different from mine. See if you can sense the difference."

Hazuki tried, but found it difficult, as looking into her own was the mental equivalent of staring into the sun, and she had difficulty getting a "close" look at Chikaru's due to the indefinite space between. "I'm sorry, I can't see it." Things began to blur as she felt frustration building.

"It's okay," Chikaru assured her, easing things back into focus with her voice. "You're doing brilliant work as it is. I think I can see something, though, and I'd like to look more closely, if I could."

"Be my guest."

"Well… that's a truer turn of phrase than you might realize," Chikaru said cryptically.

"Oh? To ask you one of *your* favorite questions, then, what are your intentions?"

As Hazuki watched with growing amazement, the fire within Chikaru seemed to split, half of its infinite brilliance slowly moving from her center, down the length of one arm, into the palm of her hand. A vibrant tether of light reached down the spiderweb paths from this

projection to the remainder of her energy source. Hazuki could feel it growing closer, casting its warmth directly into her. Finally, at the boundary where their hands were touching, it stopped.

"May I come in?" Chikaru's voice came, and Hazuki fancied she could hear it from the tiny star itself.

"Have you done this sort of thing before?" Hazuki asked, somewhat dumbfounded at the apparent ease with which Chikaru had moved her consciousness.

"Not… exactly. But it's just another exchange of energy, really. I'm just going to be along for the ride this time. You needn't worry: I'll still be in me while I'm with you."

"In other words, you *haven't* done this sort of thing before."

"Details, details. I've been practicing."

"For how long?"

"How long have you been practicing kendo? We each play to our strengths, Hazuki-chan."

Hazuki had to concede her this point, but doubt nagged nonetheless. "I don't want you to get hurt."

"You *can't* hurt me, Hazuki," Chikaru said then, and these words carried a certainty, and a trust, that simply awed Hazuki as she heard them.

She took one more deep breath, allowing herself to relax against her partner. "Then… yes, be my guest."

That said, Chikaru's presence crossed the boundary between them, escorted by a small swarm of both of their fireflies. Hazuki felt herself gasp as a warmth unlike any prior *Souma* spread from her hand to her heart. Chikaru eased herself down the energy lines, still leaving that tether behind her to connect her with her own source.

Next came Chikaru's voice, nearer then ever before. "The first one to make an off-color joke about me finally being inside you loses."

"Deal," Hazuki whispered, strangely grateful that Chikaru's sense of humor had come along with her.

Hazuki's guest traversed the paths within her with astonishing ease, until she floated at the threshold of Hazuki's own internal sun. Here, she paused, and the two spent quite some time simply basking in one another's radiance. The shared warmth was intense, but welcome: Hazuki had never felt its like. There was a binary star in her heart, and Chikaru was sending off sparks just as intense as Hazuki's own. She felt positively flooded with light and love, and found herself hoping that one day she could even approach Chikaru's level of control so that she could share some of this amazement.

She then felt rather than heard Chikaru's thanks for the sentiment, and the assurance that this was at least as incredible for her. This was a first for both of them, after all, and there was an undeniable thrill to the knowledge that not even Chikaru, in all her wisdom and practice, had ever been through such an experience before. They were working without a net, but they had one another, and that was enough.

Gradually, though, they got back to business. "There's something different here," Chikaru told her. "Different from how it is with me, at any rate. There's not just energy being generated and circulated here: it also feels like it's being… *exchanged* somehow, like when it passes between us. It's as though there's yet another boundary."

Hazuki tried to see what she meant, but with both of them sharing so small a space, she found herself more blinded than ever as she tried to look inward in this manner. "Can you tell what it is?"

"I have the strangest feeling it's… your pilot light," Chikaru said with a mix of awe and humor. "I think Eve might be sneakier than either of us ever realized, Hazuki-chan. May… may I look?"

"Please," Hazuki breathed, but the breath became another gasp as Chikaru's fire passed into her own, and suddenly there was no need for speech.

With this touch, Hazuki remembered day after night of held hands, of shared energy, of warm cuddles and peaceful dozing together, but now she saw them from eyes other than her own. Hazuki had often been amazed at the good fortune that had brought her back to Chikaru at the end of her journeys, but for the first time, she truly felt just how much she had brought into Chikaru's life, and the reflected joy was enough to bring tears to her eyes. It would have been easy to lose herself completely in the feeling, but Chikaru helped her stay focused.

Not that this seemed to be easy for her either, though. With their energies joined at the source like this, Chikaru's push-pull analogy seemed to be coming into full effect. Hazuki felt herself flooded with Chikaru's essence, with more pouring across the tether linking Chikaru to her shell. With this, Hazuki felt a surge of fear that she was taking too much, and that Chikaru would somehow get lost within her, but Chikaru whispered assurances with shaky bravado. *If I get lost, you'll find me. And where better to be lost, really?*

After taking a moment to settle themselves as much as possible, and to hold themselves just separate enough to retain their own individual thoughts, they returned their attention to the task at hand. Through a single set of astral "eyes" they saw now that they were hovering together at the edge of a tiny sphere: a hollow place in the heart of Hazuki's *Souma* . Now it was Chikaru's turn to be hesitant, as this was something well beyond her limited experience, and she feared that she might hurt Hazuki in her ignorance. But Hazuki reminded her both of Chikaru's earlier words -- *I trust you with what's inside me* -- and her own desire to know what might be behind this final wall.

And so, together, they pushed through.

To their joint astonishment, they found themselves in another place of brilliant green, a source within the source, and suddenly they both understood. Eve had never truly taken away Hazuki's *Souma* : it had been here the entire time. That awful night when Hatsumi had disappeared had not been her first exposure to this power of creation: Hatsumi had planted this seed inside her years before, when they had been children together. It had not simply been Hatsumi's aura that had saved Hazuki from the illness that would have crippled her body and her will: it was this brilliant spark at the center of the center, this gift from the bearer of all life in the universe.

As Chikaru's projection made contact with this final *Souma*, it was as though her visiting fires were stoked by the added spark, and she began to blaze with a light so dazzling, and so pure, that this last barrier shattered with the force of it, releasing the hidden energy to merge with theirs. With this, both girls' already tenuous grips on their individual selves slipped away, and they lost themselves completely in one another, like two individual flames joining into a single bright blaze. Hazuki could no longer tell where she ended and Chikaru began, but rather than fear it, they reveled in it together. Like a combination of the waters of her own perception and the lights Chikaru had shown her, *Souma* flooded through Hazuki's shell, rushed along the imagined pathways, and poured through her hands into Chikaru, only to be returned brighter than before as their joined being hummed with warmth and brilliance and joy. Their shared source of energy converged in the place where their hands were touching, and grew impossibly greater in intensity, effortlessly burning away the barrier Hazuki had struggled with seemingly moments before. Soon the shells themselves were stripped clear, and with one thought -- ***yes*** -- the star burning where their hands had been went nova. They were lost together in an inferno that did not destroy, but instead filled them with life.

We're a phoenix. Fiery and new and stronger than ever before…

Hazuki's eyes snapped open to see Chikaru staring at her, the other girl's eyes wide and her mouth slightly open in an expression of awe.

Their hands, still pressed gently between them, were thrumming with their joined *Souma*, and their bodies shone as the energy within burst forth to light up the entire room.

She had never seen anything so beautiful, or so pure, as Chikaru was at that moment of release.

Then, as it slowly faded, there were no more crystal shells, and no more imagined motes of light. There were only two very human bodies wracked with sensation, drenched in sweat, still trembling as they collapsed into one another's arms and held tightly, wave after wave of energy shaking them until they lay gasping and shuddering together on the floor of Chikaru's room.

"Oh, my," Chikaru whispered.

Kaname sat bolt upright in her bed, letting out a hoarse, strangled cry. For a moment she just sat there, panting loudly, one hand raised to her chest, not entirely certain of where she was.

But soon Momomi was sitting up beside her and grasping her by the shoulders. "Kaname?" she said in a quaver. "Damn it, again? What happened? Are you okay?"

The voice brought her back to awareness first, and Kaname turned to face her lover, whose eyes and voice alike held a core of anxiety and concern beneath the now customary mask of irritation. "Bad dreams?" Momomi frowned.

Kaname lunged forward to kiss that frown right off of Momomi's face. She buried her hands in the other girl's disheveled brown hair and pulled her close, all but attacking her with a passion so intense, so furious, that she could hold nothing back. So many of their encounters since their stormy reconciliation had been measured and calculated, almost like a business transaction, but there was no time for that now. There was only a raw hunger, with no pretense of control.

Momomi grabbed Kaname by both wrists and threw her back to the mattress, pinning her down. Kaname looked up to see those brown eyes now filled with surprise and satisfaction, lips curled back in a smirk, cheeks flushed with a reflection of her own need.

"Well, why didn't you just say so?" Momomi hissed, then bent to lay a string of white-hot kisses along Kaname's arched neck and down to her bare collarbone, as her lover writhed beneath her.

When coherent thought finally returned, Hazuki found herself lying in the floor beside Chikaru. They were no longer touching, which was probably what had caused the intensity to settle to its current dull roar, but Hazuki could still vividly remember that feeling of unity.

"Tell me something," Chikaru said in a broken voice.

"Sure."

"Asking purely out of idle curiosity, was that what… climax feels like?"

Hazuki thought back on a string of guilt-wracked fumblings in darkened bedrooms, where release had been as much condemnation as anything. No, this had been much, much better. Dimly, though, she wondered why Chikaru had asked. "Wait, you mean you've never..?" she replied, accompanying the incomplete question with the most vague of gestures.

"Never saw the need," Chikaru exhaled.

After a few more shared deep breaths, Chikaru grasped the edge of the bed and pulled herself shakily to her feet. "We should talk," she said vaguely.

"We should," Hazuki agreed, because there was something on the edge of consciousness trying desperately to get in. Familiar dark feelings were beating against the light within her, and she knew it

would only be a matter of time before she felt the inevitable crush of guilt and shame.

As if reading her mind (which would come as no surprise at this point), Chikaru shook her head at Hazuki. "And we will. But I need you to promise me something *right now*, Hazuki, because I know you, and because I love you, and because I think I know exactly what you're feeling right now. Do *not* feel guilty about what just happened, Hazuki-chan, *please* ."

"I don't know that I can promise you that," Hazuki whispered.

Chikaru answered her in an unexpectedly forceful tone. "You can and you will. This will *not* come between us, Hazuki, do you understand me? *This. Will not. Come between us* . We'll figure this out *together* ."

"Together," Hazuki nodded, hoping that it was not already too late for that.

"Shower first, though," Chikaru nodded, running both hands back through her sweat-matted hair. "Yes, shower first, then talk."

She took a few unsteady steps toward the bathroom, then looked back at Hazuki. "Coming?"

After having been lost in a hazy, pleasant memory-dream of the past weekend with Shizuma, Nagisa gradually drifted awake to hear a most unsettling sound coming from the opposite side of the room. Tamao-chan was… crying?

No, it wasn't that. Nagisa had heard her friend weep before, after all. This was more of a soft whimpering. "Tamao-chan," she called gently. "Wake up, Tamao-chan. You're dreaming."

Tamao did not wake, though, and a concerned Nagisa slipped out from under her covers and padded across the room. Tamao was

lying with her back to Nagisa, both arms crossed over her chest as though shivering with cold. In spite of her posture, though, she was dripping with sweat.

Suddenly worried that her friend might be sick, Nagisa reached to grasp Tamao's shoulder, intending to gently shake her awake. The moment her hand made contact, though, Tamao went rigid and let out a moan, the likes of which Nagisa had recently heard ripped from her own throat while…

Mortified at what she had just witnessed, Nagisa retreated to her own bed and hastily pulled the covers over her head even as Tamao's breathing settled into a more regular rhythm. She made a silent vow to never, *ever* mention this to anyone.

Apparently she wasn't the only one to have had an interesting dream.

The shared shower was more a ritual cleansing than anything else. There was nothing even vaguely sexual about it: there was no touching other than careful scrubbing of one another's backs with washcloths (as even the slightest direct contact at this point caused the *Souma* to spark with knee-buckling intensity), and their mutual lack of clothing was hardly a problem. It was as though the very idea of being shy or uncomfortable about nudity seemed trivial and shallow after what they had just experienced.

This was not to say that Hazuki did not find herself looking, and occasionally even staring, but Chikaru did not seem to mind, and in fact seemed to be doing at least as much herself. But there was a different feel to it: Chikaru's body was like a work of art, and Hazuki found herself admiring it as such. There was no desire, and no sense of eroticism: just a pure feeling of appreciation for her loveliness, and deep gratitude for the trust expressed in this potentially vulnerable moment.

And as a consequence, there was none of the guilt she had come to expect.

In the end, the mood was not at all what Hazuki would have expected after Chikaru had essentially said "Don't you dare feel guilty about having unexpected astral sex with me. Now let's go have a shower together for good measure."

Once dried and wrapped in one of Chikaru's terrycloth robes, Hazuki joined her friend in bed, but rather than lying alongside one another as they usually did, this time they sat at opposite ends facing one another, the distance between them filled with things that needed saying.

As could be expected, Chikaru was the one who spoke first, her face twisting into a tired half-grin as she sought once again to poke the tension with humor's stick. "You know, I *really* thought I was going to be the only girl ever to graduate one of these schools without a single homoerotic experience…"

Remon stirred awake again, but this time because of a soft knock at the door. To her surprise, Kizuna was cuddled warmly (but chastely) against her: when had *that* happened, exactly? Another knock followed, and Kizuna opened her eyes sleepily. "Door?" she asked.

"Door," Remon nodded, wondering who it could be at this hour. They both hopped down from the bed, and Remon opened the door to see the blurry form of Kagome standing in the marginally brighter hallway.

"Kagome-chan?" Remon asked, ushering their younger schoolmate into the room and closing the door behind her.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" Kizuna asked, kneeling before the wide-eyed girl. "Bad dreams?"

"Can Kagome-chan stay here tonight?" the second-year whispered.

"Of course you can," Kizuna nodded, looking up at Remon to see if she agreed. Remon smiled and nodded at the unusual gesture: Kizuna usually had no trouble making the decisions for both of them.

"Thank you," said Kagome. "I don't want to be alone tonight."

"Aww, you're never alone with Percival, though," Remon assured her.

"Kagome," Kizuna said, and Remon heard an unexpected note of concern in her voice, "where *is* Percival?"

Remon's eyes went wide, then squinted in an attempt to focus. Sure enough, Kagome was not carrying her bear.

When Kagome did not answer, Kizuna eventually smiled, patted the younger girl's hand, then took her back to her bed. "You can sleep with me, Kagome-chan. I won't let any more bad dreams get you."

"Can Remon-chan sleep with us too?"

"Of course I can, Kagome-chan."

Once comfortably nestled between the two roommates, Kagome quickly fell asleep. Kizuna looked at the suddenly peaceful girl for a moment, then smiled across at Remon. "I guess it's just one of those snuggly nights?"

"Must be something in the air," Remon nodded.

"I think it goes without saying, but I'm going to say it anyway: that was not *at all* what I thought was going to happen tonight."

Hazuki nodded slowly. "I figured as much."

Chikaru paused to rub her temples. "Chalk it up as a learning experience, then. I still want to practice with you, but we'll need to be more careful next time."

"How can you be so… *clinical* about this?" Hazuki asked, letting out a frustrated sigh.

"Because it keeps me from being terrified," Chikaru admitted, looking Hazuki in the eye. "I thought I had everything under control. I was overconfident, and now… now I've hurt you. I took advantage of you."

"Stop that. I don't feel taken advantage of. I'm the one who wanted to crack that last barrier."

"And I'm the one who dragged you into the shower," Chikaru muttered.

Hazuki tilted her head to one side. "What does the shower have to do with anything?" Truth be told, the chaste nature of that interlude had *relieved* more guilt than it had inspired.

After releasing a long breath in a sigh, Chikaru went on. "I've always been the one to set the borders between us. I know things have sometimes been hard for you because of that, but… I need you to know that it's been hard for me, too."

Tears brimming in her eyes, Chikaru stared intently across the space between them. "Do you know how much I wish I could just *be* the one for you? How much easier this would all be if I could just conjure up those feelings somehow? How much it *hurts* to not be able to make you happy in *every* way you deserve, without lying to myself in the process? How confusing it is to be able to literally share *souls* with someone, now more than ever, and somehow not have the desire to share *bodies* as well?"

Hazuki held her gaze, but said nothing. She did not know what she had expected to hear from Chikaru, but it was not this.

"And I've tried," Chikaru went on. "God, I've tried. I can't tell you how many times I thought about kissing you, just to see if anything would happen, but I knew deep down that nothing would, and then I'd just

hurt you more. Even just now, in the shower, seeing how beautiful you are on the outside, thinking of how perfectly it matches what I touched inside you, I tried so hard to want you, and… I couldn't."

"Stop," Hazuki whispered, amazed at this disclosure. She had never seen Chikaru so vulnerable, or so filled with regret. "You can't help what you are any more than I can. I wouldn't ever ask you to try. I *love* you, Chikaru. And I think you're beautiful, and I'd be a fool not to want you, but… you're *straight* . And I'm *okay* with that, I *promise* ."

Chikaru gave a single soft laugh. "I never told you I'm straight, did I? If I did, I lied."

"You told me early on," Hazuki protested. "You were concerned that I'd come back to this world hoping for more from you than you could give. That was when you told me you were straight."

"No," Chikaru whispered, shaking her head. "I told you that I'm not sexually attracted to women."

"That's just semantics."

"It's a lot more than semantics," Chikaru sighed, shaking her head. "I just didn't tell you *everything* . Hazuki-chan… it's true that I'm not attracted to women, but…" She closed her eyes. "I'm not attracted to men, either."

Hazuki stared at her, eyes slowly widening.

"I'm… not a sexual being. It's not that I don't swing the same way as you, it's that I don't swing *at all* . The idea of sex holds no fulfillment for me at all. I have no drive. I don't know how else to describe it."

"No," Hazuki said, shaking her head to jar a memory loose. "The day I met you, you specifically said that by the time you were having those kinds of feelings, you were safe here at St. Lulim."

"Well, yes, I think I *used to be* straight," Chikaru admitted. "When I was twelve, and stated thinking that maybe boys were cute after all, suddenly I was here on this hill without a Y chromosome in sight. But in the end it doesn't matter: those feelings went away when Naoko did."

"What… what does Naoko have to do with..?" She trailed off, realizing the answer before Chikaru could say it.

Nodding at the look of comprehension on Hazuki's face, Chikaru explained. "The *Souma* . When it came to me, I wanted to be just like Naoko, and it's clear to me now that this meant a lot more than just being a friend and a shoulder to cry on. She never took a lover, and so I decided, consciously or not, that I wouldn't either. Once I started to recognize that in myself, I found that it really didn't bother me. Naoko was my angel, and I felt like I was her priestess. I knew that the best way I'd ever be able to help the confused lovers around me was to never become one myself: to always remain that detached observer, never coming off the fence. The fulfillment in my life comes purely from the happiness of those around me. I… understand romance, I understand desire, but… I don't have it myself, and I don't know if I ever will. That was never a *bad* thing… until now."

"But you're… you're a *huge* flirt! You flirt with me, and you cuddle with me…"

"Yes!" Chikaru sighed in exasperation. "Because it's *fun*, and because it *feels* good, and it makes *you* feel good. Why do you think I'm always asking you if you're still comfortable? I'm terrified we'll drift out of fun and warm and snuggly and wind up in that place that I just can't go, and that would *kill* me, Hazuki! And… maybe, deep down, I still hoped that I could talk myself into wanting you, but that was a fool's errand. Maybe someday it'll be different. Maybe the *Souma* will continue to change me. Until then, though, romantic love and sex… aren't important to me." Again, Chikaru looked up to meet Hazuki's eyes. "Not like they are to you."

Hazuki could only nod slowly.

When Chikaru spoke next, it was with obvious difficulty. "Hazuki-chan, I love you in ways I didn't know existed, and I promise you that we'll get through this, but… there's something I need to tell you."

"Go on," Hazuki whispered.

"I was wrong. What happened tonight isn't just something I can chalk up as a learning experience. I know that I can't be what you are, and I'd certainly never ask you to be what I am, but… when you *do* fall in love with someone who can give you what I can't…" She paused to swallow hard, then went on. "I hope whoever she is knows how to share, because I can't *bear* the idea of a day without you in my life, and without sharing what's inside us. I'm sorry, I know that's incredibly selfish for me to say, but…" She trailed off, looking simply devastated with herself.

Hazuki understood, though: maybe they could "get through" this, but how could they truly put something so beautiful behind them?

One thing was certain, though: they were not going to get any further with this tonight, not while Chikaru of all people was being downright Hazuki-like in her expressions of shame. "Chikaru," Hazuki heard herself say, "I love you, and I'm not sorry for what happened. But I think we need to be alone right now. We're not in any shape to be talking about this."

"You're right," Chikaru nodded, though she didn't look happy about it at all. Hazuki had to wonder how frequently someone had to play the counselor's role for the counselor. Maybe she'd managed to download a little of that wisdom after all?

"Talk tomorrow, then?" Hazuki asked, reaching to lay one hand over Chikaru's. She ended up snatching it back, though, as the Souma again sparked hotly.

"Maybe by then *that* will have cooled down as well," Chikaru grimaced, rubbing her hand gingerly.

"Another reason I should go. We'll never get any rest like this."

"I'll… see you tomorrow, then?"

"Count on it. I'm not going anywhere."

Chikaru flashed a shadow of her normal cheeky grin. "Except to your room."

"Yeah, but I won't be alone. Not really."

They shared a more genuine smile, then. At last, Hazuki pushed herself off the bed, then gathered up her still-drenched pajamas and stepped out into the silent hallway, quietly latching the door as she left.

Late the following afternoon, after a particularly brutal council meeting, Chikaru wandered the campus alone, exchanging subdued greetings with others as she passed, but otherwise remaining lost in thought. She and Hazuki had not scheduled a practice for today (Thursday council meetings had a tendency to overrun), and she was thus finding herself at loose ends. The time to herself had been helpful after all, and there were some things she needed to tell her dear friend… if she could only find her.

In the end, though, it came as no surprise that she found Hazuki at Naoko's tree, sitting with her back to the trunk, looking equally thoughtful. Chikaru knelt beside her, and while Hazuki looked up and gave her a tiny smile, she did not speak.

"You may be interested in knowing that our little convergence did not go completely unnoticed last night," Chikaru said at last. "Apparently we gave a lot of people very… *nice* dreams. I just hope we haven't made the entire dormitory immortal in the process."

Hazuki chuckled, but still said nothing.

"My network of spies has heard a new rumor about you, you know. Apparently the bandages on your leg are to cover up your *yakuza* tattoos. Let me just say I'm deeply offended that you never told me about your ties to the criminal underworld: they could have been useful several times in the past few weeks."

This earned her a roll of the eyes, but still no words.

Chikaru's heart sank as she realized humor wasn't getting them anywhere. "I'm sorry for what I said last night, Hazuki-chan," she whispered. "I was being selfish. I want you to know that I'll never hold you back from something you want. I hope you *do* fall in love, and I'll celebrate with you when it happens. I promise not to be in the way any more than you want me to be." She smiled wryly. "We have a long life ahead of us. I can back away when you need me to."

Silence fell once again, and Chikaru sighed in seeming defeat. Would they ever be able to return to what they had been? Had things changed for the worse after all?

"I was right," Hazuki finally said.

"About what?" Chikaru asked in reply, tilting her head.

Hazuki turned to her, and to Chikaru's profound relief, a teasing smile spread across that normally somber face. "Yours are *much* nicer than Momomi's."

Chikaru laughed heartily, and gratefully clasped the hand Hazuki held out to her. The *Souma* flowed between them now as it always had, and she knew, thankfully, that she had been right after all. They *would* get though this.

Together .

Next: Investigation

Investigation

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Just before chapter 7, I reached 1000 hits between this story and Red Bows. This makes me unaccountably happy. Thanks, everyone! (Only 30K+ more to go to catch up with ya, Nine!)

Your manic blood runs thick my friend

Are you looking for a clean escape?

What's left when the locks have all been broken

Young children of authority

-Indigo Girls

Part 9: Investigation

Nagisa tried not too watch too carefully as Tamao picked distractedly at her dinner. Their daily conversation thus far had been minimal due to Tamao's seeming detachment from reality, and admittedly, Nagisa was not in a hurry to change that. Not that she was at all upset with Tamao, of course, but… what exactly could she say?

At last, though, Tamao sighed and looked up at her roommate. "Nagisa-chan?"

"Yes, Tamao-chan?" Nagisa said brightly.

Tamao frowned, obviously struggling to find the right words. "Last night…"

Panic closed in. *Oh no, she knows I touched her right before she…*

"… did I talk in my sleep at all?"

"No!" Nagisa said, perhaps a little too loudly, as she got two or three looks from elsewhere at the table. More quietly, she went on. "No, I didn't hear Tamao-chan… *talk*… at all. Why does Tamao-chan ask?"

"Oh, it's nothing, really," Tamao said, a blush creeping across her cheeks. "I just had some very… vivid dreams."

"How… interesting," Nagisa nodded, giving a forced smile. "But no, there was no talking. None at all."

Tamao nodded slowly, returning her attention to her dinner.

Before she could think better of it, Nagisa said "Good dreams, I hope?"

After a wonderfully quiet and comfortable evening with Chikaru (though they mutually agreed to take a break from the meditation training), Hazuki spent most of the night catching up on homework. Here was one definite advantage to the *Souma* : the diminished need for sleep gave her plenty of time to keep up on school and training alike. Hazuki had never been the best student in either of her incarnations, but she had all the reason in the world to apply herself now.

The following day was likewise shaping up to be nothing short of ordinary. After the usual block of Friday classes, it was off to the sports complex for some warm-ups and kata practice while awaiting Chikaru's arrival for their afternoon lessons and sparring.

A surprise was waiting for her when she opened her locker, however: a note had been slipped in through the door vents. Mindful of similar notes she used to get from (always anonymous) admirers back in her own world, Hazuki found herself vaguely amused: perhaps the volume of their meditation two nights past had triggered some bravery?

However, it became quickly clear that this was no love note: it was a simple folded piece of paper, and the characters looked very hastily scrawled. Hazuki opened and read it, and felt her heart thud with apprehension.

Someone was in your room today.

Warm-ups forgotten, Hazuki slammed her locker closed, snatched up her equipment bag, and was still accelerating when she emerged from the sports complex. She took the distance to the dormitory at a dead sprint, then was barely able to check herself as she made her way upstairs to her room.

The door was locked when she arrived, so she hastily turned the key and threw open the door…

… to see nothing out of the ordinary. Her room looked the same as when she had left for her first class.

Still breathing heavily from her hard run across the campus (more rumors, yay!), Hazuki tossed her equipment bag on the bed and began scanning her surroundings for the important things. Her sword was still hanging on the wall, and her books were lined neatly on their shelves. The wardrobe was closed, and a quick look inside revealed nothing obviously out of place.

It was at this point that a similarly breathless Chikaru arrived. "Hazuki-chan?" she called from the open door.

Hazuki looked up at her, somewhat surprised by her winded appearance. "Chikaru? Are you okay?"

"Never better. What's happened here?"

"How did you know something was wrong?" Hazuki asked. "The *Souma* ?"

Chikaru smiled at this, still trying to get her breath back. "No, I was outside, and I saw you run past. You're frighteningly quick, you know."

"This was in my gym locker," Hazuki said, handing over the note.

After scanning it, Chikaru gave her an alarmed look. "Was this today?"

"I don't know. I never opened my locker yesterday, so it could have been yesterday *or* today."

"And no idea who left it, I presume," Chikaru nodded slowly. "Is anything missing?"

"Nothing yet," Hazuki growled, feeling her earlier apprehension making a segue into fury. Was not even her dorm room safe?

Chikaru sat on Hazuki's bed and pondered this. "The Sisters have master keys, and they *have* been known to make surprise inspections. But I don't think whoever wrote you this note would have done so if it had just been one of them."

Still finding nothing missing, Hazuki started checking desk drawers. Starting from the bottom, she found that the small lockbox containing her cash was still there, and after keying it open she saw that its contents were undisturbed. "Would you check under the bed for my laptop bag, please?" she asked Chikaru as she checked the next drawer.

"Here, and appropriately heavy," Chikaru reported, placing the bag on the bed. "Shall I look inside?"

"Please," Hazuki nodded, finding nothing amiss in the middle drawer. She pulled open the top one, then, and removed her phone and Hatsumi's comb, placing both on the desktop. The remaining contents were miscellaneous bits and bobs that she would not have missed anyway.

"Laptop, power supply, spare mouse, discs, papers, check," Chikaru informed her. "Do you still have my Carmen picture as your wallpaper?"

Hazuki smiled at this, the humor in Chikaru's voice deflating her anger to a degree. "Only because I don't have one of you in your pirate outfit. Or in the shower, for that matter."

"Ooh! Hello there, Wicked Hazuki! Nice to see you again."

"Nice to be back," Hazuki laughed, smiling across the room at Chikaru. And really, it *was* nice to be able to flirt again so soon after… well, *after* .

Chikaru looked like she might have been formulating a bawdy reply when her eyes went wide. "Hazuki, where did you get this?" she asked, gently setting the laptop bag aside and crossing to the desk in order to look closely at the comb.

"Princess Fuji gave it to me. The world that was like ancient Japan, remember?"

"Naoko had one just like this," Chikaru said softly as she looked it over.

"So did Hatsumi."

"Do you think all three might be the same comb?"

Hatsumi frowned. "Possibly. My head hurts when I think too hard about that sort of thing, though."

"May I?" Chikaru asked, extending one hand to the comb, but looking up at Hazuki for permission.

"Of course." She made a face, feeling suddenly ashamed of herself. "I… put it away after Aaya's visit: I didn't want as many reminders of her."

Chikaru picked up the comb and studied it while Hazuki went through her wardrobe more carefully, confirming that nothing was out of place. The Lulim president closed her eyes, and after a moment of concentration she gave her friend a confused look. "Hazuki? I think this comb has… its own *Souma* ?" Her voice trailed upward at the end, turning it into more of a question.

"Really?" Hazuki asked, stopping her search to look back at Chikaru. "How do you mean?"

"It feels like it has its own tiny little source," Chikaru explained, cocking an eyebrow at Hazuki. "One of Eve's artifacts, perhaps?"

"Is it… alive?"

"I don't think so. But once we're feeling up to meditating again, we should maybe check it out."

Hazuki nodded. "Would you mind keeping it at your room, then? Mine doesn't feel so secure all of a sudden."

"Of course. I'm sorry, Hazuki-chan, I should be helping you check things."

"You're fine," Hazuki sighed. "Nothing seems to be missing."

Chikaru made a sour face. "Maybe the note was just intended to unsettle you?"

"Yeah, well, it worked."

"Either that or someone came in hoping for something they couldn't find? You don't keep a diary, do you?"

"Never have," Hazuki said, shaking her head.

"Should we report this to the Sisters? Or the Etoile?"

Hazuki thought about this for a long while. "No," she said at last. "Not yet, anyway. But…" An idea came to her, and she gave a slow smile. "If I could borrow the services of the Secrets Club, perhaps?"

"Ah, an investigation?"

"I was thinking more of a trap…"

By dinnertime, the trap was ready, and Hazuki accompanied Chikaru, Kizuna, Remon and Kagome to the dining hall in much better spirits. The third-years in particular had outdone themselves, coming up with the idea of having a hidden digital camera rigged to take a picture each time the door opened. They ran a pair of easily hidden wires along the baseboards to hang just past the door frame, then attached a thin strip of foil to the door itself, so that the circuit would be completed each time the door swung inward. Hazuki was more than impressed, and wondered where the pair had developed these particular skills.

Initial tests had gone poorly, though, as the pictures were snapped too quickly, each revealing only a door slightly ajar. Kagome then suggested (in her own elliptical way) that they use the camera's built-in function to take several pictures in succession each time the circuit was tripped, and this gave much better results.

Kizuna and Remon took great glee in being sworn into secrecy, and Hazuki had to wonder if the two of them had bought into the rumor about her connection to a crime family. Hopefully Chikaru would put that right, as they would no doubt believe their onee-sama over her.

In the end, even with all the lingering concern over who the intruder and the note-writer could have been, the focus of Hazuki's attention both during the setup and the subsequent meal was Kagome. This was the first time Hazuki could remember seeing the tiny thing without her teddy bear in tow, but when at one point Hazuki asked gently about Percival's whereabouts, Kagome simply stared at her in reply. She eventually gathered from the others that Percival had not

emerged from Kagome's room since Wednesday, and no one had been able to pry the reason from the enigmatic second-year. More than once, though, Hazuki found Kagome's hand in her own for a few minutes at a time, and at any given moment she seemed to be in some form of contact with one or another of the girls. This was apparently something new, as Kagome had very infrequently been the one to initiate contact with others in the past.

Whatever it was, though, she was obviously in good hands with Kizuna, Remon, and especially Chikaru.

Once dinner was over, Hazuki bade the Lulim trio farewell, and while waiting for Chikaru (who seemed to be discussing something with Sister Mizue - Hazuki hoped it was not about the intruder), she was pleasantly surprised to be approached by Tamao. "Good evening, Hazuki-chan."

"Good evening, Tamao-chan," Hazuki smiled. "How have you been?"

"Oh… maybe a bit distracted," Tamao said with a slight roll of the eyes and the traces of a blush. "It's been an odd week."

"I wholly agree. What can I do for you?"

"As it happens, I had a question about kendo," Tamao explained. "In spite of how this is going to sound after the dinner with Shizuma-sama last weekend, I was wondering if you might be able to find the time to teach me a little? I think I could use a little self-discipline, if nothing else."

"Hmm," Hazuki said with a deepening smile. "Nothing personal, Tamao-chan, but I never would have pictured you holding a sword. Something about the pen being mightier, and all that."

This actually got a shy laugh from Tamao. "Maybe."

"How about this?" Hazuki proposed. "When I work with Chikaru, it's not all about swords. There are a lot of good breathing, movement

and stance exercises as well, and those might be a better place to start if you've never had any serious martial arts training. Kendo can be tricky because you need to do a lot of the work in pairs, so unless you think Nagisa-chan might be interested as well..?"

Tamao made a face somewhere between amused and terrified. "I'm not sure if I could talk her into it, but… the rest sounds intriguing, if you think you could teach a novice like me."

Right about here, Chikaru came down from the head table and approached from the opposite side of Tamao, waggling her eyebrows knowingly at Hazuki as she did. Returning the expression with a roll of the eyes, Hazuki beckoned her over. "Chikaru, Tamao-chan was just asking about the possibility of some introductory martial arts training."

"Wonderful!" Chikaru smiled at the Miator fifth-year. "All dinner-table joking aside, Hazuki-chan is a wonderful sensei, and I've monopolized her talents for too long. I'm sure she could make the time to give you some one-on-one instruction."

"Oh, but I wouldn't want to interrupt anything," Tamao said. "Could I… maybe work with both of you?"

"I'm sure we could arrange for that," Hazuki said firmly before Chikaru could get another word in. "In fact, if you're not busy tomorrow morning at around nine, come out to the soccer field. We were planning to do some unarmed work, and we could just as easily go through some basic forms and stances."

"Nine o'clock, then?" Tamao nodded, looking genuinely excited at the idea.

"I'd suggest you wear something other than your uniform," Chikaru warned her. "I don't think they had flexibility in mind when they designed yours."

"Thank you, Hazuki-chan, Chikaru-sama," Tamao nodded. "I should… catch up with Nagisa-chan now. I'll see you tomorrow!"

She departed with a small bow, and once she was gone, Hazuki turned a questioning look on Chikaru.

The Lulim president, ever dignified, stuck out her tongue. "I said nothing."

By about half an hour into their first practice as a trio, Hazuki, Chikaru and Tamao had gathered quite a crowd in the stands around the soccer field. Hazuki was more than slightly bemused at how many would take time out of their Saturday morning just to watch three girls doing movement exercises (in a customized style that Chikaru had dubbed "T'ai Chi-zuki"), but the addition of an extremely popular student council president from one school and a well-regarded Etoile candidate from another had obviously increased the visibility of these outdoor workouts.

Hazuki was even more surprised when a pair of younger members of the kendo team approached them asking if this was an open instruction, and if so, could they join?

In all, Hazuki ended up with seven students by the time ten o'clock rolled around, performing the stances and forms with varying degrees of grace, but with clear enthusiasm. Nobody seemed to be enjoying it more than Chikaru, though, who beamed at Hazuki the entire time, and never missed a chance to refer to her as "sensei."

Shortly thereafter, though, their routine was interrupted by the unmistakable voice of Sister Mizue. "Azuma-kun!"

Surprised to hear this, of all voices, Hazuki looked around to the edge of the field to see the Sister standing tall and ominous, flanked on one side by three uniformed Spicans recognized immediately as Amane, Hikari and Kaname, and on the other by a gentleman in a

suit. The presence of a man of any sort on the hill was odd enough to cause a whispered buzz to sweep through the crowd.

"Take a break, everyone?" Hazuki offered to the group, exchanging bewildered looks with both Chikaru and Tamao before hastening to meet the odd quintet.

Only when she arrived did she realize that Chikaru had come with her, because the Sister's next comment was directed not at Hazuki, but at her. "Minamoto-san, this matter does not concern you."

"Is there any way I can assist?" Chikaru asked, indicating the presence of her Spican counterpart and the two Etoile.

Lowering her voice to ward off curious ears, Mizue narrowed her eyes at Chikaru. "Thank you, Minamoto-san, but a criminal investigation is being performed, and as Azuma-kun is not a student of St. Lulim's School, this does not concern you. You will please return to your activities at once."

"It's okay, Minamoto-sama," Hazuki heard herself say. "Go on back to the others, please, and tell them we'll continue another time?"

After shooting Hazuki a worried look, Chikaru nodded slowly and returned to the small crowd of confused students. Hazuki took a steadying breath and regarded the Sister. "So. How may I help with the investigation?"

Sister Mizue shot a withering glare at the man standing to her left, obviously furious at his presence. "This is Inspector Fukuyama of the prefectural police. Inspector?"

Fukuyama nodded to the Sister, then turned his attention to Hazuki. "Azuma-san, we have reason to believe that you are in possession of an unregistered bladed weapon."

"I *am* in possession of a sword, but I assure you that it *is* registered," Hazuki frowned. A cold, sinking feeling began to take shape in her

guts as she suddenly realized what her mysterious intruder might have been up to after all. *Reason to believe* indeed. Hazuki forced herself not to look at Kaname, all too certain that she had a hand in this somehow.

"Is the weapon with you at this time?" the inspector asked in an almost bored voice.

"No, it's in my dormitory room."

"I shall need to see it immediately, along with proof of registration."

"Of course," Hazuki bowed. She then turned to the Sister, as though asking her leave.

"Konohana-san," Mizue said, her voice crisp with suppressed irritation, "please stay here to ensure we are not followed by a crowd of overly curious busybodies. Ladies and Inspector, follow me."

While Hikari did as the Sister asked and remained on the scene, the remaining five returned to the dormitory with Sister Mizue in the lead, the speed of her steps belying her advanced age, followed by Hazuki, then the inspector, then Kaname and Amane. Every eye lingered as they passed, and every hushed whisper was all too audible to Hazuki's ears. She already felt like a criminal, and hot fury seethed beneath her skin.

When they reached Hazuki's room, she unlocked the door and opened it for the inspector, who entered first. His eyes were immediately drawn to the sword hanging on the wall. "This belongs to you?" he asked, as the rest filed in behind him.

"Yes, Inspector. It was commissioned from a licensed Kyoto smith in February."

"You're aware that you are to keep your registration with the weapon at all times?"

"Yes, Inspector. I keep it attached to the scabbard, inside that tag." She pointed to the tag in question, which hung from the scabbard by a leather strap.

Fukuyama reached across Hazuki's bed to remove the blade from the wall. He then took it from its sheath and looked it over. "Unsharpened," he noted, testing the edge with his thumb, "and blunted tip. The markings appear to be legitimate enough, but let's have a look at the registration." He sheathed the blade, then snapped open the folding tag dangling from the scabbard.

As Hazuki expected, It was empty.

"I see no registration here, Azuma-san," Fukuyama said, stating the very obvious.

"That's where I've always kept it," Hazuki nodded. "I suppose it must have gotten lost."

"Lost," Fukuyama nodded, looking up at her with hooded eyes. "I cannot very well take your word for that, Azuma-san. Are you aware of the penalties for possession of a weapon with no proof of registration?"

"Very aware, Inspector," Hazuki nodded. She then took a deep breath and played her trump card, hoping that her intruder had not been as thorough as she feared. "Which is why I asked the smith for a second copy, which I keep close by. If I may?"

"By all means," the inspector nodded.

Hazuki took the five steps necessary to reach her wardrobe, opened it, and reached inside.

"Stop right there," Fukuyama barked, and Hazuki snatched her hand back, realizing too late that it might look as though she were reaching for another weapon. "Tell me where, and I'll retrieve it."

"Inside the skirt pocket of that uniform," Hazuki nodded, indicating the sailor fuku she'd worn throughout her year-long journey.

Fukuyama stepped in front of her, reached into the uniform, and to Hazuki's relief, pulled out a folded document in a plastic slipcase. Here, at last, Hazuki allowed herself to look at Kaname, and found her student council president watching the proceedings with a detached expression.

After checking the document against the markings on the blade, Fukuyama returned the former to Hazuki while setting the latter down on her bed. "Take care that this one doesn't get lost as well, Azuma-san."

"Of course, Inspector."

"You'll allow me a moment to check the remainder of the living area, I'm sure?" the inspector said, more to Mizue than Hazuki.

"Of course," the Sister nodded, frostily. "We'll be waiting in the hall."

Hazuki followed the Sister and the other two out and waited while the inspector checked the rest of the room for contraband. Hazuki stared fixedly at a neighboring door, her relief already abandoning her in favor of unbridled fury. If she were to believe her anonymous note-dropper, someone had entered her room, and within one or two days her registration was mysteriously missing, and someone had tipped off the police to her "crime." She knew the code well enough to know what this would have meant: prison time, exorbitant fines, disgrace to her family and certainly expulsion from St. Spica, even if she managed to convince someone to check with the sword's maker to prove its legitimacy. This was no simple school prank.

After a while, the inspector joined them in the hall. "Very well, the room is clean." He gave Hazuki a searching look. "I'm curious about the camera, but no laws have been broken. Thank you for your cooperation, Sister Mizue."

"Of course, Inspector. Ohtori-san, Kenjyo-san, please escort the inspector to his vehicle. Azuma-kun, my office, *now* ." That said, the Sister strode away, still looking disgusted at the intrusion.

Before she went, Amane set a hand on Hazuki's shoulder, and only then did Hazuki realize that she was trembling. The Etoile gave her a kind look and a light squeeze. "We knew better, Hazuki-san," she said quietly before doing as the Sister had instructed.

Once the others were gone, Hazuki carefully locked her door, then followed the Sister to her office.

For several long minutes, Sister Mizue paced before her desk while Hazuki stood straight and tall, waiting for the explosion. She was more than aware that she had done nothing wrong, of course, but that did not at all mean that she didn't expect the tongue-lashing of her life.

At great length, the Sister turned to face her. In spite of their difference in height, Hazuki felt very much that she was being loomed over.

"The very presence of police on these grounds is deeply disturbing, Azuma-kun. And while the *esteemed* inspector is correct in saying that no laws have been broken today, I am nonetheless quite troubled that someone found it necessary to anonymously accuse one of my boarders of a weapons code violation."

Hazuki said nothing, but made a mental note that she had been correct about the anonymous tip.

Sister Mizue resumed her pacing as she continued. "I am quite aware of your troubled past, Azuma-kun: the isolation, the self-mutilation, the poetic obsession with death, and of course the unfortunate event in December. As a consequence, I have tried to overlook some of the more troubling aspects of your residency. Normally I would not permit any student, much less one with recent

suicidal tendencies, to keep such a weapon as yours in her room, but since your physician believes your practice of kendo to be tied in with your recovery, I thought it best to allow you this. In light of the glowing remarks of your various sensei, I even chose to overlook smaller violations, such as your possession of a wireless phone, and your tendency to spend late hours in the company of the St. Lulim president."

Here, she paused in her pacing and glared once again at Hazuki. "I was growing confident that trouble would no longer follow Azuma Hazuki. So tell me, child, what *really* happened here?"

After a deep breath, Hazuki told the honest truth. "I don't know, Sister. It's possible that I simply lost my original registration."

"Nonsense," Mizue snapped. "How could a folded document have fallen from a secure place designed specifically for the purpose of holding it? This was no accident."

"I can't be certain of that, Sister."

Mizue folded her arms. "I certainly hope that this was not a ploy to grant yourself greater infamy amongst the student body, Azuma-kun?"

Hazuki's eyes bugged. Was the Sister actually accusing her of calling the police on herself? "Sister, I would never--"

"No, I daresay you wouldn't," Mizue interrupted, giving a sharp nod. "You've shown far more sense than that since your arrival. So I ask again, Azuma-kun: what *really* happened here?"

"I'm honestly not certain," Hazuki said tightly. She had a good idea of it, of course, but knew very well that a baseless accusation of her class president would sound foolish or even desperate.

After studying her for a while, the Sister leaned in closely. "Perhaps you could explain the tripwire and the camera in your room?"

Hazuki opened and closed her mouth a few times, feeling rather like a fish. Did the woman miss nothing? "I… have suspicions," she said delicately, "that someone may have entered my room without my permission, and the camera is to track comings and goings."

"Someone who could have, for example, stolen your registration?"

"Yes, Sister. I suppose they could have."

"And you chose not to report this suspicion for what reason?"

"Because… I considered it my problem to solve," Hazuki sighed. "And I'm still not certain it really happened. I didn't witness it myself."

"Turn out your pockets, Azuma-kun," Mizue said suddenly.

"I… I'm sorry?"

"Your pockets, child. Turn out your pockets."

Reluctantly, Hazuki reached into the pocket of her shorts and pulled out her spare registration, as well as Hatsumi's letter-opener, its blade wrapped snugly in several layers of adhesive bandage. Mizue held out her hand, and Hazuki placed the paper knife across the Sister's palm.

"I'm sure you can see how this disturbs me," Mizue went on. "It would appear that someone has seen fit to try to accuse you of a serious crime, and now I find that for some reason you are carrying a knife on your person."

"That's not why I carry it," Hazuki tried to explain. "It--"

"Can you see how this disturbs me, Azuma-kun?" the Sister repeated sternly.

"Yes, Sister," Hazuki said. How could she tell the head of the dorms that she had to carry the letter opener at all times because she never knew when she might be sucked into another world, and she needed

her *real* sword to come with her when she did? "But please, Sister, I promise you, this is completely unrelated. That letter opener belonged to someone very dear to me who's… gone now, and it's really all I have left to remember her by. I wrapped the blade to make it safe to carry."

"So you did," Mizue scowled as she looked it over. "Nonetheless, you shall not carry this on your person for as long as you live in this dormitory, do you understand?"

"Yes, Sister," Hazuki nodded, hoping distantly that Aaya's suspicions would take more than the next two years to materialize.

To her surprise, though, rather than confiscate it, the Sister held out the knife to her. "If I find you carrying this again, you will be evicted from this dormitory, is that clear?"

"Yes, Sister. Thank you, Sister."

"The presence of the police on these grounds is an embarrassment, Azuma-kun. I trust you see that it is not merely *your* problem. You will report any further 'suspicions' to myself, your class president, or the Etoile, do you understand?"

"Yes, Sister," Hazuki nodded, gritting her teeth at the idea of coming to Kaname with her "suspicions."

"Very good. You are dismissed to your room to put that knife away. I trust that we will not have to have this talk again."

"No, Sister." Hazuki said with a low bow. She then left the office with as much dignity as she could muster. Her anger, by now, had drained away, leaving her feeling exhausted and uncomfortably helpless.

With a combination of surprise and gratitude, Hazuki found Tamao waiting for her in the hall. "Hazuki-chan, is everything okay?"

After yet another steadying breath, Hazuki regarded her schoolmate with a forced smile. "So… tea?" she said weakly.

Kaname strode into the St. Spica student council office and slammed the door behind her. Deeply frustrated, she threw herself into her chair and spun to look out the window toward the distant ocean. "So close," she muttered to nobody.

To her deep shock, nobody answered right back in an all-too-familiar voice. "So close to *what* exactly, Kenjyo-san?"

With a cry of alarm, Kaname leaped to her feet and turned to face the sound. There, standing in the shadows, was her St. Lulim counterpart. "What are *you* doing here?" she scowled. "This room is off-limits."

"Oh, are we going to play the getting-each-other-into-trouble game?" Chikaru smiled sweetly, stepping out into the light with a small stack of papers in her hands. "Somehow I don't think it would go well for you."

"What do you have there?" Kaname asked suspiciously.

"Some very dry criminal code on the possession of blades over fifteen centimeters in length," Chikaru replied, looking over the top sheet. "Look at this, you even have the section on sword registration highlighted. You really shouldn't leave things like this lying around on your desk, Kenjyo-san. People might begin to ask questions."

Kaname crossed her arms and looked coldly at her. "I don't know what you're trying to insinuate, Minamoto."

"Oh, come now, we both know you're smarter than that," Chikaru went on smiling. "You're looking up weapon codes, and suddenly the police have 'reason to believe' that your new rival is breaking them? What do you *think* I'm trying to insinuate?"

How on earth had the girl heard that from fifty meters away? "I've done nothing. And even if I had, you have no proof."

"There, you see? I'll never understand why the culprit, when cornered, always manages to both deny the wrongdoing and then smugly add that there's no proof. You're practically admitting guilt just by that last bit alone."

Kaname put her hands down on her desk and gazed levelly at Chikaru. "Stay out of this. This is St. Spica business."

Her smile never even flickering, Chikaru put her head to one side and regarded Kaname as one might regard a silly child. "No, Kenjyo-san, this is *my* business. Azuma Hazuki is very dear to me, just as she was very dear to my sister."

At the mention of Naoko, Kaname flinched and looked away. Chikaru was doing that same trick with her eyes, trying to peer right through her. What *was* it with those Minamoto girls?

"And as much as I've tried to emulate my sister in all things," Chikaru went on, "I've never quite mastered her knack for unconditional forgiveness. You see, Kenjyo-san, there's a lot I know about you. I know about Naoko at the morning meal, of course. I know of some of the threats you made to other candidates for your current position. I know that you sabotaged Amane-sama's shoe during Carmen last year, and that I have you to thank for a week spent on crutches." When Kaname turned shocked eyes on her, Chikaru gave a laugh that was both light-hearted and chilling, given the circumstance. "Don't look so surprised: I was the costume designer. Did you think I wouldn't check the shoe closely after the fact and find the damage done to it?"

"I had nothing to do with that," Kaname hissed.

"Are you aware that you're a terrible liar when you're cornered?" Chikaru said, actually *winking* at her. "There are also many things I *suspect* about you, Kenjyo-san. For example, I'm reasonably certain

that you tried more than once to force yourself on one of our current Etoile last year. I'm also more than aware of the way you used to letch on underclassmen in ways that would make even Hanazono-sama blush at the sheer audacity of it."

"You have no proof for *any* of this!"

"Not as such, no," Chikaru admitted, stepping around the desk to face off directly with Kaname. "But I can tell you this, Kenjyo-san: I have eyes and ears *everywhere* . You may fancy yourself a person of great importance here in this office, but you'll do well to remember how it is that I once had the nickname 'Shadow Empress of Astraea.' From this day forward, there are going to be *many* eyes on you."

Kaname found herself unable to look away from those searching brown eyes, and to her mounting disquiet, Chikaru was still smiling. Moreover, she had yet to raise her voice.

"It's over, Kaname. All of it. You'll drop this ridiculous vendetta you have with Hazuki here and now. Should I learn that you are doing anything else to try to sabotage her standing at this school, that you are abusing your position as council president in any way, or that you should so much as lay a finger on an underclassman, I will *ruin* you."

With that, Chikaru reached up to cup Kaname's cheek with one hand, the expression on her face almost tender in spite of her direct threat. "I'll see you at the next council meeting," she whispered, then dropped her hand and left the office.

Her breath short, her face on fire where it had been touched, Kaname sank slowly into her chair as she heard the door click closed.

Next: Unforgiven

Unforgiven

How long can you be agile

Dancing between the altar and the mercy seat?

Here's a chance to make a choice

Are you aware of the fire beneath your feet?

-Indigo Girls

Part 10: Unforgiven

In barely more than twenty-four hours, it seemed that no girl in the dormitory had missed the story of how Azuma Hazuki had been unjustly accused of a crime she had not committed. The incident was all the buzz both before and after Mass, with theories for the false whistle-blower ranging from a jealous kendo sensei (fearing for her job) to an unnamed vindictive Lulim student who wanted Chikaru for herself.

Hazuki herself spent the early afternoon riding out the storm in the company of Tamao and Nagisa over several mugs of tea in the student lounge. She quickly lost count of the students from all three of the schools who approached their table to offer support and sympathetic indignation, but she was certainly grateful for it. Nonetheless, she could not help but grimace at the idea that Sister Mizue had been right: the incident had certainly increased either her fame or her infamy, depending on who you asked.

"Honestly," Nagisa groused at one point, "I even had someone suggest to me that it might have been Shizuma, trying to 'protect' me

from you. It's as though they can't believe anyone would spend time with me without somehow wanting to steal me away from her."

"Welcome to my world," Tamao muttered.

Hazuki snorted. "If they gave it any thought, they'd realize I'm only using you to get to your roommate," she said, intentionally timing her words to hit the punchline as Tamao was taking a sip. The end result was Nagisa narrowly missing a tea-bath while Hazuki got a hard swat across the arm from Tamao for her trouble.

"You're evil," Tamao sputtered. "Pure, unfettered evil."

"Everyone has to have a hobby," Hazuki shrugged, taking a sip of her own.

Before Nagisa could add something, a fourth voice interrupted them. "Hello, everyone."

"Oh, hello, Tsubomi-chan!" Nagisa smiled at the young pink-haired Spican standing beside their table.

"Join us for some tea?" Tamao offered.

"No, thank you. I just had a question for Hazuki-senpai."

"What can I do for you?" Hazuki smiled at the younger girl. In spite of both of them being on the kendo team, she could not remember ever actually speaking to Tsubomi: their only interaction had been in the form of protective glares whenever Hazuki had spoken to the far more gregarious Yaya.

Tsubomi frowned uncomfortably. "I heard about your practice yesterday at the soccer field. Will you be doing more of those?"

Honestly, Hazuki had not thought much about that, given the tumultuous events that had immediately followed said practice. "I don't see why not," she considered. "Provided people still want to come, of course."

Nodding slowly, Tsubomi seemed to consider her next words carefully. "Do you teach any… self-defense techniques? Unarmed, I mean?"

Beside her, Nagisa and Tamao exchanged somewhat alarmed looks, but Hazuki just nodded slowly. "I could come up with something, if you're interested."

"Not for me specifically," Tsubomi said, shaking her head a little too quickly. "I just… think there might be some people who'd like to… know some of that stuff. Just in case, you know?"

"Of course," Hazuki went on nodding. "We could go through some basic grapples and throws, that sort of thing. When would you like to start?"

"Oh, whenever," Tsubomi shrugged, her suddenly non-committal pose looking somewhat forced. "I'll ask around and see who might want to come. Can we talk about it again after practice tomorrow?"

"Certainly, Tsubomi-san. Let me know what works best for you."

With a slight bow in thanks, Tsubomi dismissed herself, leaving the other three to puzzle in her absence.

During the warm-up stretches for the evening spar with Chikaru, Hazuki brought up her confusion at the odd encounter. "She's an interesting girl. Never seems to want to ask something directly, does she?"

Chikaru nodded, idly working out some kinks in her neck. "Tsubomi-chan is very proud. She seems determined never to show weakness in any way."

"She's a little demon in team practice. She's got the quickness and the instincts, but not a lot on the discipline side of things. Easily

flustered. If she makes a mistake in a kata, it completely blows her concentration for the rest of the exercise, if not longer."

"Tell me something," Chikaru smiled. "Is there anyone on the team whose technique you haven't studied, and graded in your own mind?"

Hazuki furrowed her brow at this. "What do you mean?"

"Just that you probably have no idea what a natural teacher you are," Chikaru explained. "You should have seen yourself yesterday morning. You were in heaven."

"I was?" Hazuki blinked.

"Why do you think there's a rumor going around that the kendo sensei is the one who tried to get you arrested?"

Hazuki snorted derisively. "Because there's a rumor like that for just about everyone?"

"Maybe, but even the most ridiculous rumor has to start somewhere, Hazuki-chan. You're *good* at this. Maybe it's part of some sort of inherent samurai desire to build up the strength of your allies. I'm willing to bet you're a better sensei than… well, the sensei."

"Lovely," Hazuki sighed. "She already hates me."

"From what I hear, she hates *everyone* ."

With a shrug, Hazuki tried to steer the conversation away from herself. "But why would Tsubomi come to me asking about self-defense? From what Tamao and Nagisa say, she's always been a firecracker who doesn't suffer fools gladly. I'm surprised she needs the help."

"Maybe it isn't for her after all?" Chikaru pondered.

"So maybe she's asking for a friend?"

"Mmm, not so much that. You may have noticed how protective she is of Yaya-chan?"

"Hard not to."

"True," Chikaru said with a soft chuckle. "Tsubomi-chan fancies herself Yaya's defender: after some things that happened last year, she's not going to let *anyone* break her onee-sama's heart. Perhaps she wants to do more to live up to her self-proclaimed title?"

"But… physical self-defense," Hazuki said, her face twisting uncomfortably. "Is there something to this? Are there… attacks on campus?"

"Oh, we've had a few ladies who've been, shall we say, overly forceful with their flirting, much to the discomfort of the underclassmen. One of the worst offenders was…"

"Kaname, I'm sure?" Hazuki finished for her.

"Actually, I was going to say Shizuma."

Hazuki turned wide eyes on her companion. "Wait, Shizuma? *Nagisa's* Shizuma?"

"Kissed many an underclassman in her day, yes," Chikaru nodded. "And at least as many upperclassmen, so I'm told. There was a time when being made the Etoile's target was a thrill and an honor, but it never lasted more than a few days for any of them."

"But… I mean, I've heard stories, but Shizuma's not *like* that. Even a romantically backwards girl like me can see how devoted she and Nagisa are."

"Shizuma's fifth year was an interesting time," Chikaru explained. "She was recovering from a terrible loss, and tried to fill the hole in her heart any way she could. In her partial defense, she meant none of the girls any harm, and treated each of them very kindly for as

briefly as their paths might cross. What she did was selfish, but she was not specifically trying to dominate or intimidate, and thankfully did no lasting damage to her targets. I did my best to make sure of that."

"What do you mean?" Hazuki asked, finding this last statement somewhat ominous.

Chikaru crossed her arms for a moment, looking maybe a bit uncomfortable herself. "Shizuma and Naoko were good friends, and I've known her well since the day I arrived here. I knew her heart then, and I know it now. But there was a time that I wasn't so sure of what she was becoming, so I started keeping a very close eye on her. If she had ever truly crossed the line… I would have taken action."

There was not a trace of humor as she said this, and Hazuki wondered just how serious, and how painful, that action would have been.

"But since that never came to be," Chikaru continued, "it simply fell to me to provide my customary wise counsel to one ex-fling after another."

For a moment, Hazuki's mind swirled with images of Chikaru following behind Shizuma, using her empathy and caring heart to clean up the string of broken souls left in the silver-haired girl's wake. "This is a strange school," she said quietly.

"You're just now figuring that out, eh?"

"But it sounds like Shizuma was never considered an… *attacker*, as such. Have there been others who have been?"

"There have been… rumors," Chikaru said carefully, "but nothing substantiated. Possibly Tsubomi-chan has heard some of these as well, and wants to protect herself and Yaya in the event that any are true. Do you intend to teach her?"

"I think so," Hazuki nodded slowly. "Do you want in on this?"

"Certainly. If you want to make an actual class of it, I'm sure I can bring in some of my girls. That might make Tsubomi-chan feel more comfortable."

Hazuki nodded, troubled at the amount left unsaid, both by Tsubomi and Chikaru. There was a story here, and Hazuki was sure that whatever it was, she was not going to like it.

By calling it a potential new club, Hazuki and Chikaru were able to secure one of the larger rooms in the gymnasium for Wednesday afternoon. In all, nine other girls showed up, including Tsubomi, Yaya, Remon, Kizuna, both of Chikaru's council assistants, Nagisa, Tamao, and a second-year Miator girl named Tsukidate Chiyo. After going through some of the basics in terms of objective and purpose to these moves (as well as general safety concerns with the work they would be doing), Hazuki would demonstrate a type of defense with Chikaru, then have the other girls pair up to practice while she wandered the room giving pointers on technique.

Some of them were having an easier go of it than others: Kizuna and Remon, to nobody's surprise, seemed to be having a great time tossing one another around, while little Chiyo seemed very reluctant to risk anyone getting hurt. With encouragement and hands-on demonstrations, though (allowing herself to get beaten up plenty in the process), Hazuki was eventually able to get everyone working together. They worked on grapples, throws and escapes, with particular emphasis on the latter.

"One of the keys is not to worry about size difference," Hazuki told them at one stage. "Unless you intend to go best of three points with someone, all you need to do is put them off balance long enough for you to get away. Being quick can be a lot better than being strong."

By the end of an hour together, each and every one of the girls, even Chiyo, was able to face an "attacking" Hazuki and either throw her to

the mat, get her in an arm-lock, or twist out of her grasp and get clear. Hazuki found herself quite impressed with everyone's hard work, and was quick to offer congratulations. "Very good, everyone. Let's call it a day with that."

"Can we do this again sometime?" Tsubomi asked.

"Sure. Next week at the same time, then?" There was a chorus of nods. "Excellent. If you know anyone else who'd like to join us, the more the merrier."

With that, everyone headed back to the dormitory to get cleaned up in time for dinner. Most of them wound up sharing a table for the evening meal, merrily recounting some of their best moves of the workout. Even shy little Chiyo seemed to be enjoying herself, blushing happily as Nagisa praised the way she had knocked Yaya onto her backside at one point. It was almost enough to make Hazuki forget about why the group had met in the first place.

Later that evening, though, some of the unease was returning, so Hazuki abandoned her homework for the moment and wandered down the hall to Yaya's room. She found the fourth-year awake and chatting with Hikari (the both of them also dodging homework), and was quickly invited inside for tea.

"So what brings you to my double-turned-single?" Yaya asked, sitting back in her chair as Hazuki seated herself at the empty desk opposite her and Hikari sat on the unused bed.

"I'm worried about Tsubomi," said Hazuki, deciding to cut right to the chase. "Tonight's meeting was her idea, and considering that up until now she's barely looked at me, I can't help wondering if something happened to drive her to ask me."

Yaya pursed her lips, considering this. "If something *specific* has happened, she hasn't told me about it. I think this is something she's wanted to do for a while, and maybe after seeing your impromptu class last weekend she figured you'd be the one to ask."

"I guess what worries me is the idea that someone feels like she needs to defend herself here. Is there concern about being attacked here in the dorms?"

"I don't think it's that," Hikari replied.

"I do," Yaya snorted.

"Yaya-chan," Hikari said in an almost disappointed tone.

Ignoring the other fourth-year, Yaya turned a smirk on Hazuki. "Come on, you're sleeping with the queen of the rumor mill, and you haven't heard?"

"Chikaru knows when *not* to talk about things, even to me," Hazuki frowned. "She says she's heard unsubstantiated rumors, and she didn't discuss them with me. Are you saying there *have* been attacks?"

Seemingly oblivious to the intent look she was getting from Hikari, Yaya nodded. "Yes, there have."

"By whom?" Hazuki asked, feeling her fingers clench around her teacup.

Yaya raised her eyebrows. "You of all people should have *no* trouble imagining who I'm talking about."

"Kaname, then?" Hazuki said in an even voice.

"That's enough, Yaya-chan," Hikari snapped, her voice as forceful as Hazuki had ever heard it.

"Dammit, Hikari, she should know! You know as well as I do that the queen bitch has it in for her!"

"What should I know, Etoile-sama?" Hazuki asked, fixing her eyes on the young blonde. She found herself flashing back to that first meal, where a terrified-looking Hikari had interrupted the confrontation

between Kaname and Hazuki, doing her duty as the Etoile in spite of her obvious discomfort. What history did these two have?

Hikari took a deep breath and answered slowly, in a measured voice. "Kenjyo-san and I had… some unfortunate encounters last year."

Yaya threw up her hands in exasperation. "For Christ's sake, Hikari, she tried to rape you!"

The words hung there for a long while. Hazuki set down her tea before she managed to shatter the cup in her hand. "Is this true, Etoile-sama?"

Looking a mix of angry and deeply unsettled, Hikari looked away from both of them. "She didn't want Amane-senpai and me to run for Etoile. She was trying to intimidate me."

"Oh, that makes it *so* much better," Yaya scowled. "That's why she had you pinned to her bed, right?"

"But you stopped her, Yaya-chan," Hikari reminded her. "Just like Amane-senpai stopped her the time before."

"Wait, she tried to rape you *twice?* " Hazuki asked, aghast.

"That doesn't make it any better," Yaya argued, ignoring Hazuki's question. "She still assaulted you! What if we hadn't been there? What would have happened then, huh?"

"But you *were* there," Hikari insisted. "Everything worked out in the end."

Hazuki stood, not wanting to hear another word of this. "Thank you for the tea, Yaya-chan," she said stiffly, "but I need to go find Kaname now and break both of her arms."

"Be my guest," Yaya said with a wave, looking grimly amused.

"Hazuki-san, *no!* " Hikari said, standing up from the bed and deliberately putting herself in Hazuki's way.

"Did she try to rape you, Etoile-sama?" Hazuki asked pointblank.

Hikari chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. "Yes, she did, but…"

"Then I may not stop with her arms," Hazuki interrupted, trying to step around the smaller girl.

"That's enough!" Hikari shouted, putting one hand up to hold Hazuki back. "Hazuki-san, if you attack Kenjyo-san, you'll be expelled from St. Spica…"

"But she gets a free pass for attacking you?"

"… and it will be *my duty as Etoile* to make sure that you are," Hikari finished. "Please, Hazuki-san, don't put me in that position. As for you, Yaya-chan, you can stop fanning these flames *right now* ."

Hazuki gritted her teeth, letting her fury subside. "I'm sorry, Etoile-sama," she said, giving Hikari a tight bow before retaking her seat.

"Thank you," Hikari sighed. "I'm grateful to both of you for your concern, honestly, but there's no need for this kind of anger. It's in the past."

"How is she still a student here, much less in a position of authority?" Hazuki grated. "How come she wasn't bounced out on her bony ass for this?" She looked up at Yaya then, almost accusingly. Both Yaya and Amane had known, and no one had said anything?

As if reading her mind, Hikari said "Because I asked them not to tell anyone about what had happened."

Hazuki almost had to bite her tongue as she mentally filled in the blanks. Rather than risk dishonor or the pain of an investigation, she had simply swept the incident under the rug and moved on with her life, hoping that everyone else would do the same.

"More than that, though," Hikari added after a pause, "I've forgiven her."

After a lengthy silence, Hazuki shook her head slowly. "Did she ask you to?"

"No. But I forgave her anyway."

"Then you're a better person then I'll ever be," Hazuki said softly. "But at the same time, Etoile-sama, have you considered that forgiving her isn't going to do a damn bit of good if she doesn't want it?"

That said, she stood and shook her head again. "I'm sorry to have pried into your business. You have my word that nothing will leave this room. Good evening to you both."

Without waiting for a reply, she bowed in farewell and left before she could start screaming.

Tsubomi sat up in bed, her history textbook in her lap, completely failing to concentrate on her reading assignment. Her mind was still too full of the evening's workout, and even hours later, she found herself trying to commit every throw and grapple to memory. She'd be ready the next time.

Focusing on that also helped drive the other images out of her mind's eye: the sight of her council president emerging from Hazuki's room, the pain of being slammed up against the wall with a forearm pressing against her windpipe while Kaname brought wide, insane eyes within inches of her own…

You saw nothing! Do you understand me? Nothing!

Tsubomi scowled at the memories. Never again, she promised herself. No one would ever try that on her again.

Hazuki had just finished unlocking her door when she heard Hikari's soft voice from down the hall. "Hazuki-san?"

"Yes, Etoile-sama?" she sighed, turning to the younger girl.

"Can I speak with you in private for a moment?"

"I'm not going to do anything stupid," she assured Hikari, holding up both hands. "You've nothing to worry about."

"Nonetheless, I need to speak with you. May I come in?"

Hazuki nodded, opening the door and waving her inside. "Have a seat."

"Thank you, but I won't be long," Hikari nodded, turning to face Hazuki as the door closed behind them. "There's more that you need to know."

"About you and Kenjyo-san?"

"No," Hikari said, shaking her head. "About… me and you."

Perplexed by this, Hazuki sat on the end of her bed to better meet the Etoile's eyes. It wasn't as though the two of them had much history. "What do you mean?"

Hikari briefly pulled at her fingers, obviously nervous about what she was about to say. "After you played tennis with Kenjyo-san, I followed you as you left the court with Minamoto-san. I wanted to be certain you were okay, and… I overheard some of your conversation."

"What… *exactly* did you overhear?" Hazuki asked quietly. She tried to replay the conversation in her own head, but found it difficult to remember. She had the distinct feeling, however, that it had contained details she simply didn't feel ready to discuss.

"About your suicide attempt," Hikari whispered, "and your memories of it. The way you could still remember how it felt to be… dying, and how you woke up feeling stronger and confused and needing to find Minamoto-san."

Hazuki nodded slowly. It didn't sound like Hikari knew about the more fantastic elements… or was there more she wasn't saying?

"I'm sorry to have intruded on you that day," Hikari went on, "but it's only fair that you know."

"I understand," Hazuki nodded. "I feel like I've intruded on you, too."

"That doesn't matter to me. What matters is that you don't act on what you heard tonight. I don't want my past to ruin your future, especially since your being here at all is a miracle after what you suffered through. Don't let something that's over and done with affect *your* second chance."

"Thank you, Etoile-sama," Hazuki said quietly. "I won't try to avenge you if you don't want me to." She then narrowed her eyes at the younger girl. "However, in the future, if I *should* ever walk in on her doing that to you or anyone else? I'll put her through a wall."

Hikari closed her eyes. "That's not helping, Hazuki-san."

"Fine, I'll use less… *theatrical* levels of force. But I won't let her get away with it."

"She's changed, Hazuki-san. I know that might be hard for you to believe, given the way she's butted heads with you, but I truly believe that she's changed."

Hazuki smiled wryly. "Again, you're a better person than I am if you can believe that."

Tamao raised her hand to knock at Chikaru's door, but once again completely failed to do so. This was the fourth time in the last week that she'd walked all the way to the first floor of the Lulim wing, hoping to finally have this talk, but each time she'd gotten this close only to have her nerve, and her words, desert her completely.

Eyes downcast, the fifth-year Miatoran let out a long sigh and began the long trudge back down the hall.

What was she going to say, really? Could she honestly tell Chikaru of the things she'd seen in that dream, and the way they made her feel? The emotional roller-coaster that took her from physical ecstasy to bitter emptiness in the space of moments?

And how in God's name was she going to tell Chikaru that *she* had been a part of those images?

On the other hand, who else could she tell? The thought of bringing this up with Nagisa made her shiver with embarrassment, and while Shizuma might be more understanding, Tamao didn't feel quite right coming to her with something like this. How she wished Naoko were still here to give her that smile: the one that warmed her heart and told her that her loneliness would end one day…

But Naoko was gone, Shizuma was far away, and Nagisa was… well, *Nagisa*, and as far as they had come as friends, it would probably be a long time, if ever, before Tamao felt comfortable enough to share something like this.

Telling Hazuki, of course, was out of the question, unless she wanted to prove to the world that it really *was* possible to die of being embarrassed.

"Hold on, hold on," came the annoyed voice from behind the closed door. Hikari waited patiently until it opened, revealing the rather surprised face of Kaname. "Etoile-sama," she nodded, a note of question in her voice.

"Good evening, Kenjyo-san. I hope I'm not interrupting anything?"

"I was about to have a shower," the older girl said, opening the door enough for Hikari to see that she was in a robe. The sounds of running water and Momomi's tuneful singing came from the open bathroom door behind her.

"I won't keep you, then," Hikari nodded, trying not to blush. "There was just something I needed to tell you."

Kaname nodded wordlessly, crossing her arms and looking down at Hikari with no small amount of suspicion.

Images flashed through Hikari's mind, and she remembered the Kaname who had dragged her into this very room, given her a baffling speech about global warming of all things, and then thrown her down on the bed before Yaya-chan had come to her rescue. But then she remembered the Kaname who had smiled and ruffled her hair after the tennis duel with Amane, and who had waited up all night with Yaya and Shion when Hikari herself had gone searching for her amnesiac love.

Surely this was someone who had repented her actions. She had changed… hadn't she?

"It's about what happened between us last year. I just wanted you to know that… I forgive you, Kenjyo-san."

Kaname blinked twice at her. "Is there anything else, Etoile-sama?"

"No, I just… needed you to know that."

Still looking puzzled and even slightly annoyed, Kaname nodded to her. "Good evening, then," she said, then closed the door.

Hikari walked away slowly, a chill of unease spreading within her.

Next: Solace

Solace

The paws of fear upon your chest

Only love can soothe that beast

And my words are paper tigers

No match for the predator of pain inside her

-Indigo Girls

Part 11: Solace

Chikaru got up from her desk to answer the knock at her door, wondering if Kizuna and Remon had decided to take her up on her offer to help with their homework after all. To her surprise, though, it was Tamao she found standing in the hallway. "Good evening, Tamao-chan. Please come in."

"Thank you, Chikaru-sama," Tamao smiled somewhat wearily. "Nagisa-chan is having a chat with Shizuma-sama, so I thought I'd give her some space, and… I've been meaning to talk with you for a while now."

"Of course. Shall I make tea?"

"That would be lovely, thank you."

A few minutes later, the two girls knelt opposite one another at Chikaru's small tea table as she poured for both of them. "So what brings you here this evening? Hazuki-chan won't be here until much later -- she's with the kendo team at a tournament."

"I know. This is something I wanted to talk to you about specifically," Tamao replied, taking a sip of the tea to brace herself for the admission to come. "I've been meaning to bring this up for a few days now, but I never had the nerve."

"Do tell," Chikaru nodded, giving the younger girl a reassuring smile.

Tamao took a long, slow breath. "Last week, I had a very… *vivid* dream."

"Hmm, go on," Chikaru nodded, smiling more to herself now. She didn't need to think too hard on which day this would have been.

In spite of a quickly deepening blush, Tamao went on. "It was about you and Hazuki-chan. You were kneeling in front of one another, holding hands, and you were… you were… well, you weren't… wearing any clothes, and… even though I was watching you, it's like I wasn't really there."

Chikaru arched an eyebrow at this, remembering the event itself. While the nudity and the actual holding of hands were not quite accurate, she found it very interesting that Tamao had pictured the position the two of them had been in during the meditation.

"Then you leaned in toward one another and… started kissing, and…" tears began to well up in Tamao's eyes, so Chikaru put down her tea and hurried around to the other side of the table to hold her suddenly shaking hand.

"It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen," Tamao choked. "It was like you were both shining brighter than the sun, and even just watching you was enough to make me… to make my body…"

"I understand," Chikaru assured her, patting her hand. "I'm so sorry, Tamao-chan."

"Then afterward, I felt so… *devastated* . Like I was once again on the outside looking in on something wonderful that I could never be a

part of. That I could never share what the two of you have, even though I know it's not like that between you. I don't know how else to describe it, Chikaru, I…"

Chikaru put her arms around Tamao as the younger girl began to weep profusely. "It was just a dream, Tamao-chan," she soothed, even though she had a feeling there was far more to it than that alone. She wondered if Tamao had any idea how often Chikaru had pondered how long it would be until she herself were the one on the outside looking in.

Once again, she found herself reminded that irony was alive and well on Astraea Hill.

The bus ride back from the tournament was far livelier than usual, the normally reserved members of the kendo team unable to fully contain their excitement at their almost unprecedented success.

Even Tsubomi herself reflected that this was the most she had smiled in ages, the recent memory of her own personal victory constantly forcing itself to the forefront of her consciousness. It was a new position for her to be in, that of the victor attempting to be appropriately humble, but it was one that she would certainly be happy to get used to.

Yaya, seated at the window seat next to her, seemed determined to keep prodding her excitement along, though, as she recounted several of Tsubomi's final matches, waving her arms in approximation of the younger girl's moves. "And then the way you came up with that swipe from the left while her guard was down? That was a thing of beauty! I swear, she never saw it coming!"

"It was a lucky shot," Tsubomi said modestly, even though she knew there was far more to it than that. She might never have known to take that shot without help, after all.

"You don't win your entire division with lucky shots, Tsubomi-chan," Yaya grinned, poking her in the ribs. "You were a *monster* today. I knew you had it in you!"

"Hey, you didn't do so badly yourself," Tsubomi insisted. Yaya would be the first to admit that she was a fair-to-middling kendouka at best, but even she had advanced three rounds in her own division, which was two more than she ever had before.

"Something in the air," Yaya shrugged. "It was St. Spica's day for sure."

"Something in the air," Tsubomi repeated, nodding slowly. It certainly felt that way: after the initial shock of the first round, the entire team had fought with confidence today. Tsubomi herself, while on one level feeling hopelessly outmatched in her final rounds, had been inspired as never before.

The source of that inspiration, as it happened, was currently sitting across the aisle from them, leaning back in her seat with eyes closed, listening to an mp3 player via earbuds. Hazuki had been there between each and every one of Tsubomi's matches, giving her incredibly accurate insight into her next opponent's strengths and weaknesses. Even as much as she'd felt on fire today, Tsubomi knew that she would probably have never gotten out of the second or third round without those critical pieces of advice from her older schoolmate.

Nor had Hazuki's advice been limited to her alone, as throughout the tournament several of them had briefly conferred with her prior to their matches. In fact, it was getting to the point that more of them were looking to Hazuki than the sensei, a detail which was no doubt going to make Hazuki's life interesting if it kept up at this rate.

All of which made that gut-punch in first round of the senior division that much more puzzling. Hazuki had given so many of them the answers, and had watched every match, pacing the gymnasium like a caged tiger while her eyes took in every detail of every fighter.

How in the world could she have been eliminated so quickly?

None of the expected reasons seemed to apply. Hazuki had not panicked against a live opponent; rather, she had appeared controlled and even dispassionate during her match. It did not appear to be a classic case of being a teacher and not a "do-er," because she had looked completely in her element the entire time. And yet, while even Tsubomi had seen several places where Hazuki could have scored easy points, she had not, for whatever reason, pressed her advantage against her clearly outclassed opponent. When the match had ended in a scoreless tie, the judges had given the nod to the other girl (as she had at least spent the majority of the time on the offensive), after which Hazuki did nothing more than bow graciously, give her opponent a smile, and leave the floor.

Afterward, in plain sight of the rest of the team, the sensei had quite vocally ripped Hazuki a new one, but none of this stopped the quiet fifth-year from being an active participant in the rest of the tournament. In spite of Hazuki not contributing a single point to their team score, Tsubomi had to wonder how well Spica would have fared without her.

Seemingly thinking along the same lines, Yaya leaned in and gave Tsubomi a mischievous smile. "It's also nice to have a real sensei for a change, isn't it?" she whispered.

Tsubomi nodded slowly, toying with the first-place medal that hung around her neck. She only hoped that the day's success was a harbinger of good things to come.

"Chikaru-sama, do you ever get tired of girls crying all over you?"

"Not when they're my friends," Chikaru said with a chuckle, planting a small kiss atop Tamao's head.

The Miator fifth-year gave the older girl a damp smile. "But everyone's your friend."

"Mmm, you'd be surprised, I think. But you, darling Tamao, are very dear to me indeed, so my shoulder is yours."

Tamao shifted comfortably against Chikaru, enjoying the affection in spite of herself. Only Chikaru would have listened to such an admission and within minutes had the both of them lying in bed, propped up by pillows, with Tamao held snugly in her arms. For someone who professed no attraction to women, she certainly seemed fearless about physical contact. ("And anyway," Chikaru had said, "I don't have a psychiatrist's couch, so this will have to do.")

"Feeling better?" Chikaru asked after a while.

"I think so," Tamao mumbled into that shoulder. "Can I ask you a question, though?"

"Of course."

At the risk of sounding like she was digging for praise, Tamao pressed on. "Why exactly *am* I dear to you, anyway?"

"What a ridiculous question," Chikaru smiled. "Why wouldn't you be?"

"I'm… I'm not part of your school, I'm not in any of your clubs, and now I'm… maybe trying to get in your way."

"Well, let's put a stop to that *last* thought right away, Tamao-chan. I know you have recent practice at being involved in a difficult love triangle, but that's *not* what this is."

When Tamao did not answer, Chikaru continued. "As for why you're dear to me? I suppose I could take the easy way out and say that Hazuki-chan is very fond of you, and thus by some form of commutative affection, I am as well, but that's far from the only reason."

Tamao could not help but giggle at the way Chikaru couched it like mathematics. "That's actually how Shizuma-sama and I first became close. We had Nagisa-chan in common."

"Yes, but now she loves you for your own sake, not just as Nagisa's roommate. Just like you're far more to me than just Hazuki-chan's friend. You're a brilliant student, a gifted writer, and an admirable young woman who would have made a damned fine Etoile. Wise beyond your years, incredibly loyal, and willing to put the happiness of others above your own. A touch obsessive, but I'm hardly one to cast stones at you for *that* ." On the last word, she gently tweaked Tamao's nose.

"You're too nice," Tamao blushed. "I don't deserve all that."

"Nonsense. You deserve more. And if your goal is to try to find more with Hazuki-chan, you'll have my blessing."

Letting out a slow sigh, Tamao returned to the root issue. "But how could I ever have what you and she have?"

Chikaru let out a low growl of what Tamao hoped was amused frustration, then adjusted herself so she could meet the other girl's eyes. "Tamao-chan, I'm only going to go through this once, so pay close attention. You keep saying that you and she could never have what she and I have. Let me be clear when I tell you that this is completely, fully, one hundred percent *true* ."

Even as Tamao's heart sank with these words, Chikaru went on. "What Hazuki-chan and I have is incredibly rare, even to the point of being unique. In a very real sense, it took divine intervention for us to meet, and to become what we are. We have things in common that I simply can't explain, but the short form is that we're literally soul-sisters. So no, you and she simply *cannot* have the same relationship that she and I have."

Here, Chikaru cupped Tamao's face with one warm hand. "Now, level with me, Tamao-chan. Is this real? Do you think you might be

falling for her?"

Confronted with those eyes, at first Tamao could only nod. After a pause, she licked her lips and spoke. "Yes. I think I might be."

"Then it's *okay*, Tamao-chan. You may think that what you saw in your dream was the most beautiful thing ever, but you can have something beautiful too, whatever it turns out to be."

Nagisa smiled at the laptop screen, wondering if the webcam was picking up the extent of her blush. "You say the sweetest things, Shizuma."

"Deservedly so," Shizuma's image winked from the display. "So tell me, sweetheart, what are your plans for the weekend?"

"Oh, same old boring Shizuma-less life on Astraea Hill," Nagisa sighed melodramatically. "Tamao-chan is trying to convince me to go to some sort of t'ai chi lesson Hazuki-chan will be teaching tomorrow morning."

"Is that so? Hmm, I think you should go: I have a feeling you'll enjoy it. In its own way, it's a lot like dancing."

"Really?" Nagisa asked, surprised at her girlfriend's words. "I'm no athlete, though. Do you think I could keep up?"

"I think you're wonderfully fit, thank you," Shizuma winked again. "And besides, a little extra flexibility can only be a good thing, not to mention stamina, right?"

"Hmm, I suppose you're right," Nagisa smiled, but it deepened into a grin as she had a wicked thought. "Oh! And earlier this week we had a self-defense class, so watch out! The next time you come at me, I might end up pinning *you* down!"

Shizuma's eyes went wide. "Promise?"

Feeling utterly defeated by their science homework, Kizuna and Remon marched down the first-floor hallway to Chikaru's room, hoping to enlist their president's aid before lights-out.

"Do you really think we should bother her?" Remon hissed. "We have all weekend. What if she's with Hazuki-senpai?"

"You forget," Kizuna said, waggling one finger at her roommate, "that Hazuki-senpai is away with the kendo team today."

"Can you call it forgetting if I never knew it in the first place?"

"And anyway, she offered to help, remember?" She stopped short at their destination, knocked twice, and then without waiting for an answer opened the unlocked door. "Oh, Chikaru-onee-sama *aaAAAA!* "

Remon piled in behind her, wondering what could have caused Kizuna's greeting to turn into that cry of shock. Her jaw dropped as she looked over her friend's shoulder to see Chikaru cuddled in bed with… *Tamao?!*

Coming to her senses first, Remon grabbed Kizuna's shoulder and pulled her back outside. "Don't mind us; we were *just* leaving!" she smiled at the room's two occupants, then fumbled for the knob and pulled the door closed. For a while, the two stood there staring fixedly at the opposite wall, neither willing to break the silence.

"Um," Kizuna said at last.

"I'm sure it was nothing," Remon nodded, quickly deciding that denial was the best course of action.

"Well, they *did* still have their clothes on, I guess."

"Right, right. Just a warm, friendly hug."

"In bed."

Remon gave Kizuna a sideways glare. " *We* have those."

"Yeah, but they're not always *friendly*…" Kizuna smirked.

"Do you think they'll say anything?" Tamao asked, looking mortified by the intrusion.

"No, they're good at keeping secrets," Chikaru giggled. "Well, some of them, anyway. They keep mine, and I keep theirs."

"Are you going to tell them that nothing's actually happening between us?"

"Mmm, maybe," Chikaru winked. "We can let them wonder a little bit first."

Smiling, but still looking embarrassed, Tamao laid her head back on Chikaru's shoulder. "Oh, well. It's not like it would be a bad thing."

"Hmm?"

Tamao hesitated a moment before she elaborated. "To have the rumor mill match me with you. That's a rumor I could live with."

"My dear Tamao-chan, are you flirting with me?" Chikaru laughed.

The younger girl flushed for a moment, and Chikaru wondered if she felt caught in the act. "No, of course not, but… you must have *some* idea of how many girls have had crushes on you over the years. I doubt I'm the only one who ever saw you in a dream. I think that's why it's so hard to believe there's nothing romantic going on with you and Hazuki-chan."

"What part of Not Attracted To Girls is confusing to you?" Chikaru teased. "Or is it the entire concept?"

"No, seriously, I think you might be the most admired girl in the school, and you don't even ride horses or wear an Etoile necklace. You should have the best of everything."

"I'm flattered, Tamao-chan, but so should you. You deserve to be loved, and to have the chance to share that incredible heart of yours with someone who'll cherish it as the gift it is."

"You deserve that too," Tamao whispered, "and… forgive me, Chikaru, but I can't understand why you don't have those things."

"Plenty of time for that later," Chikaru said, waving it off with as much nonchalance as she could manage.

"Will there be?" Tamao asked, her voice still barely a whisper. "When does Chikaru-sama get to be loved?"

"Why do you ask that, Tamao-chan?" Chikaru said quietly, suddenly wondering how much the girl actually knew.

Tamao did not reply, and for a moment, Chikaru found herself instinctively reaching out with her *Souma*, as she would with Hazuki, to try to read the other girl's mood. Unfortunately, she could all but feel her energy bounce back, as though striking a wall. Closing her eyes and slipping quickly into a semi-meditative state, Chikaru tried again, hoping for the impossible: that her energy would be allowed ingress, and would find an echo of itself within Tamao's shell. The dream described earlier had actually given Chikaru a flicker of hope that maybe, somehow, Tamao might have a touch of her own *Souma* that was reacting to theirs in some way.

However, her energy stayed firmly on her side of the "fence." Tamao was as human as anyone else, and as unsurprising as this was, Chikaru was still disappointed, for all of their sakes. The growing relationship between the three of them was complicated enough as it was without taking their respective mortality into account.

"Tell me more about Hazuki-chan," Tamao said, her voice suddenly sleepy.

"What would you like to know?"

"Well… she's different, isn't she?"

Chikaru arched her eyebrows. *Souma* or not, Tamao had always been perceptive, and she was more than proving so tonight. Probably the all-seeing eyes of the poet at work. "Go on."

"You know… *different* . I mean, we're all fish out of water in one way or another, but she's not like anyone else in the school. It's like she doesn't belong here, somehow, and yet here she is."

"Oh, sweetheart, you have no idea," Chikaru laughed quietly. "But that's not for me to talk about. She has an amazing story, but it's hers to tell."

"Is it a sad story?" Tamao asked, trying to stifle a yawn.

"Some of it is, but certainly not all. After all, it brought her here."

As it was well after curfew when the bus returned to Astraea Hill, the kendo team was dropped off at the Spican sports complex, where the resident students were to be escorted back to the gated area around the dormitory while those who lived off-campus waited for rides from friends and family.

Before everyone could scatter, however, the sensei gave them a curt congratulatory speech for their overwhelming victory, praising the individual medalists from each division by name. However, rather than leave it at that, she went on to add her disappointment in those who lacked the focus or drive to excel to their fullest potential, and warned them that more was expected of them if they wished to continue to represent St. Spica.

Hazuki tried not to take this personally, but since the sensei had delivered this entire section of the speech while staring right at her, it was hard not to.

Later, as the small horde made its way back to the dormitory, Yaya sidled up to Hazuki. "Are you okay, Hazuki-senpai?"

"I'm fine, actually," Hazuki nodded, not sure how much she was willing to say to Yaya after the outburst from a few nights ago.

Yaya looked back over her shoulder toward Spica and let out a snort. "Swept the medals in every division, and she's got to find something to bitch about. Ah, well. Even goddesses get to have their off-nights, right? I'm sure you'll be kicking plenty of ass next time."

"We'll see," Hazuki shrugged, pasting on an amiable smile.

Nothing more was said until they arrived at the dormitory itself, at which time Yaya, seeing Hazuki heading toward the Lulim wing, gave her a broad wink. "Get some sleep, willya?"

"Ehh, we'll see," Hazuki said again.

Before she could get halfway down the hall, though, she heard soft, quick footfalls behind her, and she turned to see Tsubomi hurrying to catch up with her. "Hazuki-senpai?"

"Yes, Tsubomi-san?"

The pink-haired second-year looked away for a moment, her hand absently reaching for the medal she still wore. "Thank you, Hazuki-senpai. I never would have won this without your help today."

"That's kind of you to say," Hazuki nodded. "And it was my pleasure to watch you."

Tsubomi managed to smile and grimace at the same time, and seemed to be agonizing over the next words. "Why did you throw your match?" she finally blurted out, looking ashamed at having said

it. "I mean, you could have beaten that girl. You could have beaten all of them."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," Hazuki said quietly, giving Tsubomi the tiniest hint of a smile. "Congratulations on your win, Tsubomi-san. I daresay it won't be your last."

After a few nods and a few more abortive attempts at articulating her point further, Tsubomi finally turned and headed back to the Spica wing. Hazuki watched her go for a moment, then continued on to Chikaru's room. She found the door unlocked, as Chikaru had said it would be, and quietly let herself in.

To her surprise, she found Chikaru lying back in bed against a stack of pillows, a sleeping Tamao cuddled against her. Chikaru gave Hazuki a warm smile and a finger to her lips. "Shh."

Hazuki set her equipment bag down, kicked off her shoes, and padded to the side of the bed. "Tell me," she said, returning Chikaru's smile, "should I be jealous or titillated?"

"I'll leave that to you, my samurai. How was the tournament?"

"A clean sweep for Spica in all divisions."

"And for you?"

"Bounced out in the first round."

Chikaru raised an eyebrow. "So you decided, then?"

Hazuki nodded slowly in reply. "It wasn't until I was actually there that I knew what I had to do."

"I hope it doesn't complicate things with the sensei," Chikaru grimaced.

"I don't think it's possible for me to care less if it does," Hazuki shrugged. "But on to more pleasant topics, what exactly is Tamao

doing in your bed?"

"Sleeping."

"Okay, I suppose I walked into that one."

"She needed to talk," Chikaru smiled. "She's starting to ask some interesting questions, too."

"Interesting in what way?"

"Questions about what you and I have. About who you are, and why you seem so different from anyone else on this hill."

Hazuki let out a slow breath. It had only been a matter of time, really. Their conversations, both over tea and elsewhere, had been growing steadily more comfortable, and more personal in nature. So far she had managed to dodge telling Tamao too many details of her past, but she wasn't going to be able to get away with it much longer: not if she wanted to keep the girl's trust.

"What are you going to tell her?" Chikaru asked, reading her mind as usual.

"I'm not sure yet."

"You know I'll back you up on whatever you decide to say. My secrets are yours, and I'll trust her if you will."

"Thank you. I'll have to play it by ear, I think."

Slowly, so as to not awaken Tamao, Hazuki eased herself down to sit on the edge of the bed, so that Tamao was between them. Chikaru reached out a hand to grasp hers, allowing their energy to effortlessly join once again. "So should I head back to my room and let you two rest?" Hazuki asked.

Chikaru grinned. "There's room."

Next: Secrets

Secrets

Dodging your memories, a field of knives

Always on the outside looking in on others' lives

I say "Love will come to you"

Hoping just because I spoke the words that they're true

-Indigo Girls

She said "I know what it's like to be dead

I know what it is to be sad"

And she's making me feel like I've never been born

-The Beatles

Part 12: Secrets

Only as she made her way up the steps to the second floor of the Miator wing early Saturday morning did it occur to Tamao that Nagisa would probably be worried about her lengthy absence. She silently cursed her negligence, and found herself wondering whether this oversight meant she was growing apart from her Nagisa-chan, or whether it was simply a sign of a more normal friendship growing out of her once obsessive ways. Not long ago, she would never have forgotten Nagisa to such an extent as this.

It had been so *comfortable* with Chikaru, though! Sleep had come so easily, and so naturally. And then waking up to find herself nestled

between Chikaru and Hazuki both? A very significant part of her wished she could have stayed in that warm place forever.

As she unlocked the door to the room she shared with Nagisa, Tamao hoped that her roommate had simply gone to bed after her call with Shizuma, and would be sleeping in as was her Saturday custom. That way, at least, she could fudge on exactly how long she had been gone.

However, Nagisa was anything but asleep: Tamao entered the room only to have her half-dressed roommate rush forward to give her a wide-eyed hug. "Tamao-chan! Where have you been? I woke up and you were still gone!"

"I'm so sorry, Nagisa-chan," Tamao grimaced. "I didn't mean to make you worry."

Nagisa looked a mixture of guilty and abashed as she broke from the embrace and gazed at her roommate with troubled eyes. "Tamao-chan is always so sweet to let me talk to Shizuma in private, but it's not fair for you to have to leave all the time, especially if it's going to keep you out all night!"

"I don't mind giving you the space, Nagisa-chan, honestly. I just… fell asleep in bed with Chikaru-sama, and…"

When Nagisa's eyes went wider than ever, Tamao quickly tried to amend herself. "I mean, I fell asleep in Chikaru-sama's bed. It was… while she was in it with me, admittedly, but not like *that* ."

"Um… is there something Tamao-chan needs to tell me?"

Tamao rubbed both hands over her face and sighed. "We were up late talking, and I fell asleep. She and Hazuki-chan told me in the morning that they hadn't wanted to wake me."

"Ha- Hazuki-chan was there too?"

"No, she got back after I fell asleep, but she was there next to me when I woke up, and…"

"Next to you?" Nagisa gasped.

"Let me start over," Tamao said, holding out both hands as if to stop Nagisa's imagination from moving any further. "I went to visit Chikaru, we stayed up late talking, I fell asleep, and when I woke up they were both there with me. Everyone still had their clothes on. There was nothing salacious about it."

"But why was Hazuki-chan there so late? I thought they weren't… *like* that?"

Tamao had wondered that as well when she woke up to the two of them. "They're not. They told me they sometimes meditate together late at night, but they skipped it because I was there."

"So… why did she, um… get in bed with you?"

Again, Tamao rubbed her face with both hands, wondering if she'd ever be able to make sense of this to herself, much less to Nagisa. The first time Tamao had awakened between the two of them, Nagisa had been away with Shizuma, so there hadn't been the need to explain anything. "It wasn't anything like *that*, I promise. It was all very… cozy, really. It was like they were both just… looking after me."

"Oh, that's good," Nagisa nodded, but then her face fell. "Um, it *is* good, right?"

"Yes, it's fine," Tamao replied, giving a somewhat forced smile. "I'm sorry, Nagisa-chan, I'm still not entirely awake. I'm going to have a shower before breakfast, I think."

"Okay," Nagisa smiled, taking Tamao's hand and giving it a squeeze. "But I really *am* sorry about driving you out of the room all the time. I

can find another place to make those calls if it would be easier for you."

"I don't mind, Nagisa-chan, honestly."

"But Tamao-chan, can you promise me something?" Nagisa went on, her eyes suddenly very intent.

Tamao tipped her head to one side, not used to seeing her roommate looking so focused on her. "Anything for my Nagisa-chan."

Nagisa glanced down for a moment, as though collecting her thoughts, then looked back up at Tamao. "You were always there for me when I needed to talk to someone about Shizuma," she said quietly, "and I know that must have been awful for you sometimes. I want you to know that you can talk to me about whatever it is that's happening with you and Hazuki and Chikaru. You've been my dearest friend since I came to this place, and I love you, and I'm here for you. So promise me you won't be the artist who suffers in silence? Your happy poems are so much nicer anyway."

"I promise," Tamao smiled, again hugging her friend. She then gave her a kiss on the cheek before retreating to the bathroom. "That in mind, you can be the first I tell that Hazuki-chan and I are going on a date after practice today." This said, she winked and closed the door behind her.

Almost immediately came the soft thump of something being thrown at the door. "Tamao-chan, that's so mean! I demand full disclosure afterward, young lady!"

Tamao grinned at this as she got ready for her shower. Things were changing between the two of them after all, but that didn't have to be a bad thing. Hazuki had said as much once, hadn't she? Wouldn't it be wonderfully ironic if she and Nagisa could eventually get to the point that they could swap girlfriend stories with one another? Tamao certainly never would have been able to predict *that* last year.

This thought gave her pause, though.

Girlfriend?

Far too early to think about *that*, she decided, as she stepped under the spray of hot water. This was only a first date, after all, and if anything, it had been Chikaru's idea for the two of them to have some time away from school together. They had no real plans other than to walk around town together and see what happened. Of course, there would be a visit to the local ice cream shop involved if Tamao had anything to say about it…

The thought of something as simple as sharing ice cream with Hazuki was enough to bring a wide, goofy smile to Tamao's face, and as she soaked and scrubbed her sleep-mussed hair she realized with some surprise that she felt ridiculously happy.

When she had awakened that morning, it had certainly been a surprise to find herself between Hazuki and Chikaru again. This time, each of the other two was holding one of her hands, and their free hands were clasped with one another and resting lightly against her, just below her ribs. With all the worry about triangles lately, she instead found herself feeling like part of a circle. As she had alluded to with Nagisa earlier, she felt both cared for and taken care of, and the world was warm and green in that place between them. She had awakened feeling more alive than she could remember in all her years. The sensation had almost immediately been lost to embarrassment and concern, but with those now fading, she felt almost buoyant.

She pictured the dark, brooding expression so frequently worn by Hazuki, and decided then and there that she had added a new goal to her life: she would make that face smile.

Hazuki hid a smile behind her ice cream cone as she watched Tamao try in vain to catch a melted drop before it could hit the table. It was a warm day -- a reminder that summer was coming up fast --

and even though their table was in the shade outside the ice cream shop, they were both fighting a losing battle.

"Every time a drop of chocolate is spilled, I die a little inside," Tamao sighed melodramatically, looking down at the small puddle on the table.

"There will be more chocolate," Hazuki assured her, giving her a mock serious face.

"Ah, but what if there isn't? What if one day we reach the end of all the world's chocolate, and I've been wasting it all this time?"

"Then civilization will surely fall," Hazuki nodded solemnly. "War, famine, general grumpiness and too much sleep due to the lack of caffeine."

"A disaster indeed," Tamao nodded, her own serious face breaking into a smirk as she regarded Hazuki's own choice. "But you, though? Vanilla? Really? I expected something frighteningly exotic for some reason."

Hazuki rescued another tendril of liquefied ice cream before it could drip from her cone. "Never mock a good vanilla. Most people think of vanilla as the *absence* of flavor, but a quality vanilla ice cream has subtleties that have baffled mortal minds for generations. Well-made vanilla holds the secrets of the universe."

"Does it now?"

"Hmm, or maybe that was Strawberry with the whole secrets of the universe thing. Maybe vanilla was the answer to the mysteries of life."

"Aren't those the same thing?"

"You might think that," Hazuki said sagely, waggling her cone at Tamao, "but there are subtleties. Subtleties, I tell you."

Unfortunately, she gave it one waggle too many, and the already precarious ball of ice cream atop the cone slipped right off. Hazuki's other hand shot out and caught it before it could splatter on the table.

"Nice reflexes!" Tamao noted.

"Thank you," Hazuki smiled, plopping the sticky mess back onto the cone and proceeding to lick her fingers clean. "If you tell anyone how un-ladylike I'm being right now, I'll… well, I'll probably agree with you."

"Your secret is safe with me," Tamao chuckled.

Hazuki took another bite, this time to hide a more pensive expression. Secrets were, of course, the elephant in the room. Even with Chikaru's assurances that she would support Hazuki in anything she told Tamao, the questions of what and how much to tell were still lacking clear answers. Tamao was a keen one, no mistake, and was probably already formulating answers of her own.

"Tell me more about you and Chikaru," the Miatoran girl asked suddenly.

"Um, okay," Hazuki replied, her brow furrowing at this abrupt turn in the conversation. "What do you want to know?"

Tamao looked thoughtful for a moment, obviously choosing her words with care. "Both of you have told me that there's nothing romantic between you, and you told me once that you can't describe exactly what it is that you have. I was wondering if you could… try? I just… want to understand you a little better, and *she's* part of what I still don't understand about *you*, I think. She's wonderful, of course, but… what is she to you?"

"Where should I begin?" Hazuki asked, bemused.

"You told me this morning that you practice meditation together late at night." Tamao's mouth curved into an almost teasing smile. "The

way you said it, I don't *think* that it was a euphemism for anything *else* that girls do in the dorm late at night. Is it part of your martial arts training?"

"Sort of," Hazuki nodded. Maybe this would be a good place to start after all. "Now, I know you've never had any of that sort of training until just last week, but I'm curious. How much have you heard about the body's energies, and how they relate to the body itself?"

"Not much," Tamao admitted. "What sort of energy do you mean?"

"It doesn't really matter what you call it," Hazuki explained. "You could call it *chi*, or spirit, or… essence, if you will. The part of us that makes us more than just flesh and bone."

"You mean the soul?"

"Hmm, I wouldn't quite go that far," Hazuki frowned. That word, to her, had a very religious tone to it, and she preferred to keep that level of mystery separate. "But… have you ever been to an acupuncturist?"

Tamao shook her head. "I've heard people swear by them, though."

Hazuki took a moment to rescue more of her ice cream, then went on, trying to talk around her mouthful. "Basic acupuncture, then. There are paths in the body through which our energy flows. Sometimes something blocks it at one point or another inside us, and we feel it as pain, discomfort, or maybe just stress or fatigue. An acupuncturist, or indeed a good masseur, can re-open those paths and allow the energy to keep flowing both within us and through us."

"Do the two of you practice acupuncture, then?"

"No, but I'm told I give a good backrub," Hazuki shrugged, smiling briefly at the memory of Hatsumi's grateful smile whenever Hazuki would give her such a massage after swim practice. The smile

flickered for a moment: this was probably the first truly *good* memory she'd had of Hatsumi in quite a while.

"Anyway," she went on to forestall any questions, as Tamao seemed to be already picking up on her shift in mood, "what Chikaru and I practice is all about the flow of energy within us, and putting the mind in touch with it. Synergy between mind, spirit and body. That sort of thing."

"Wow," Tamao said softly. "Maybe that's why she always seems so much at peace."

"Yeah, she's *way* ahead of me," Hazuki chuckled, "but I'll pick up on it eventually. She's good at sharing."

Tamao nodded as she took another bite and munched thoughtfully. "Do you share… energy, then?"

"We all do," Hazuki said, deciding quickly that now was not the time to give a full discourse on *Souma* . "There's energy all around us, connecting us all. But… yes, that's part of what we do."

"She said you were soul-sisters," Tamao said quietly. "I have to admit, it was… *daunting* to hear that."

There was a long pause, as Hazuki tried to think of a way to reassure Tamao -- to tell her that there was no need to be concerned about that bond -- but in reality, she did not understand what was going on well enough to be sure.

As it turned out, though, Tamao ended the pensive silence with a smile. "But I think I understand what she meant a little better now. Thank you."

From a cafe down the street, two other figures were doing their very best to seem as though they were *not* watching.

"This is ridiculous," Remon groused, trying to tuck an errant strand of her distinctive hair back into the bandanna she was wearing. "We shouldn't be following them."

"Come on, aren't you a little bit curious?" Kizuna asked, peeping through a small pair of binoculars toward the ice cream shop. "Tamao-senpai was with Chikaru-onee-sama last night, and now today she's out on the town with Hazuki-senpai? Something's going on here."

"Maybe we should ask Chikaru-onee-sama?"

"But she may not know," Kizuna insisted. "And that leaves it up to us to defend our onee-sama's honor, am I right?"

Remon sighed noisily. "We have science homework, you know."

"And an entire glorious Sunday to do it. Aha! It looks like they're done eating. Let's go!"

They wandered the streets for a while, peeking into shops and talking about safer topics like school and training. Tamao found herself very much enjoying the way Hazuki's face lit up whenever she spoke of the work they were doing Saturday mornings on the soccer field. It was obvious that she had a great love for the martial arts, but it was equally obvious that there was more to it than that. With her it seemed to be much more than just the particularly graceful form of violence Tamao had always thought it: ironically, it served to bring out something almost nurturing in Hazuki. Her workout had attracted more than twenty students that morning, and Tamao knew it would only grow from there. Hazuki was at her most magnetic when teaching: so unlike the moody, taciturn girl she was so much of the rest of the time.

Tamao had been progressively seeing more of what Hazuki was hiding beyond that dark exterior, but she knew that there were depths yet to discover.

Eventually, Tamao steered them past a martial arts studio and asked questions about some of the more exotic-looking weapons on display.

"And that one?"

"Naginata," Hazuki smiled. "A true weapon for a lady."

"Really? A blade on a stick is a lady's weapon?"

"Believe it or not, yes, at least traditionally."

"Do you know how to use one?"

"I've practiced," Hazuki shrugged as they continued walking. "For a while I traveled with a woman who taught me a thing or two about using one."

"Traveled with?"

Hazuki's face did that thing again, where she seemingly caught herself saying too much and closed up. Tamao had seen it several times already today, and while on the one hand it bothered her that Hazuki was still holding back, on the other it was kind of nice to see her slipping more often. Maybe she was growing more comfortable with Tamao after all.

"I… wasn't always just a schoolgirl," Hazuki said carefully. "I actually spent some time studying with some masters on the road. One of them was a woman who went by the name Chou'un. She was a master with the naginata, and I learned a lot from her in a pretty short time." She smiled, as though at a particularly amusing memory. "She had a habit of wearing a butterfly mask when she fought. A little insane, but brilliant."

Tamao nodded, trying to piece this in with what she had heard of Hazuki's past. Could this have happened in those brief months between her suicide attempt and her arrival at St. Spica? Or had she

studied with masters while she was younger, hoping to work her way out of the illness that had kept her from walking unaided? Perhaps that was why she loved teaching the arts so much: had that been the way she had rebuilt her life and her body?

But her thoughts returned once again to the suicide attempt. What had driven such a fascinating life story toward something so drastic?

Suddenly, Tamao remembered another detail from one of their earliest talks, and before she could allow herself to think better of it, she spoke. "You told me once that you knew what it was like to be far from the one you love. I was confused at the time, because I thought you meant Chikaru-chan. Who was it?"

Hazuki gave her a half-smile. "You *do* know how to change the subject," she chuckled.

Flustered, Tamao tried to save herself. "I… was reminded of it just now: I thought maybe you meant this Chou'un person."

"No, no. Chou'un was a friend, nothing more." Hazuki took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh, looking out at the horizon. "Her name was Hatsumi. She was… my adoptive sister. I fell in love with her last year, during what was to become a very dark time in my life. Even though we were never technically related, I was so disgusted by what I felt that I could never tell her, so what should have been a simple bit of unrequited love became a shameful obsession that made my life hell."

"Oh," Tamao whispered, feeling the pieces click into place. "Is that why you… I mean, last December..?"

"Actually, no," Hazuki said, shaking her head. "That was… a whole different kind of loneliness, and it didn't have to do with Hatsumi at all. At least, not as such."

Tamao nodded, and then had a sudden realization. "Wait, you said 'was' when you described her. Is she..?"

"No," Hazuki said quietly. "She's not dead. But still, I don't think I'll ever see her again."

With that said, the tall Spican looked as though she might be closing up again, so Tamao impulsively took her hand. "I'm sorry to have brought up painful memories," she whispered.

"You didn't know," Hazuki said with a sad smile.

"Oh, crap, now they're holding hands," Kizuna said, passing the binoculars to Remon.

Remon adjusted the focus and peered at the distant couple. Sure enough, they were now walking hand in hand, though neither of them looked particularly happy. "I'm sure it's nothing. Two girls holding hands doesn't have to mean anything."

"You *do* remember where we go to school, don't you? Come on, we don't want to lose them."

Their meanderings took them all the way down to the beach, where they took off their shoes and strolled through the shallows of the incoming surf. Tamao had to be careful with the long skirt of her sun dress, but Hazuki, who had dressed for the day in a t-shirt and knee-length shorts, was having less difficulty.

"Your bandages are getting wet," Tamao pointed out.

"A little," Hazuki agreed, looking down at her wrapped calf.

"Isn't that uncomfortable?"

"A little," Hazuki repeated.

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

Hazuki stopped and faced her. "That seems to be the theme for the day," she smiled.

"Well, yes, but… when we've talked before, it always seemed to be about me."

"I like talking about you. It's fast becoming one of my favorite subjects."

Tamao blushed, but continued on. "But… I wanted to talk about *you* today."

"Ask me, then," Hazuki nodded.

She hesitated for a moment before she did so. "Why *do* you always bandage that leg?"

Hazuki looked out toward the horizon again. She had expected this to come from someone else eventually. "It's not something I like to talk about. It's really the most… *vivid* reminder I have of the very darkest places in my past, and it's something I prefer to keep to myself."

She hated herself for saying it, because she really *was* trying to open up to Tamao. She figured that this would effectively put an end to their comfortable time together, but what Tamao said next blindsided her completely.

"I once intentionally frightened Nagisa-chan so that I could record the sounds of her screams and play them back for myself later."

Hazuki blinked slowly. "Why did you tell me that?"

Tamao, who had directed the last statement toward the water beneath her, turned to look Hazuki straight in the eyes. "I wanted you to know that you're not the only one to be ashamed of having been in a dark place. Nor are you the only one who once let love become obsession."

They stared into each other's eyes for a long time, until at last Hazuki nodded and led them away from the water, toward where the sand was still dry.

"What are they doing now?"

"Sitting down."

The two third-years were lying atop one of the dunes overlooking the water, and Kizuna had the binoculars propped up right at the edge to look down at their unsuspecting schoolmates. "I still think we shouldn't be doing this," Remon muttered again, grimacing at the singularly uncomfortable sensation of sand working its way into her shoes.

"Remember, it's for Chikaru-onee-sama… oh, what's this? Hazuki-senpai is taking off her…"

"What, what?" Remon gasped, grabbing for the binoculars. She brought them to her eyes and furiously adjusted the focus

"Her… bandages?"

After Hazuki slowly unwrapped her leg, Tamao, seated beside her, reached out one hand to gingerly touch some of the scars, her fingertips tracing the patterns that showed them for what they had been. "This was… writing?" Tamao asked quietly.

Hazuki nodded slowly. "It used to say 'I'm sorry, Hatsumi.'"

While she had been expecting Tamao to react with distaste or even fear, Hazuki found herself surprised by the look of genuine sadness in the other girl's eyes as she looked over the scars. While she did not ask for more to the story, Hazuki could see the question in those eyes, so she went on. "Hatsumi disappeared late last year. The last night before she left, I got into a ridiculous fight with her. She'd

gotten another love letter, and I was jealous, so I tried to rip it out of her hands, and… she was cut by her letter-opener. She forgave me on the spot, but all I could see was that I'd hurt the one I loved with my petty selfishness. After she was bandaged, I went back to my room, and…"

She paused to lick her dry lips before continuing. "As it happens, I actually *did* have shin splints at the time, so I was already wearing bandages, but… I took them off, and then I… did that to myself. I don't even know why, really. I guess I needed to punish myself. But at any rate, this isn't something I particularly want to be seen, so I keep it covered."

Tamao nodded, her sadness now tinged with sympathy. "These healed well, though," she said. "The Spica uniform has long socks you can use; you could wear those and no one would ever see this."

"I know," Hazuki nodded. "But wrapping this up every day reminds me of where I've been, and reminds me that I can never, ever let myself go there again. Chikaru once told me that every one of us, every day, has to bind her wounds and move on with life. Sometimes I'm just too literal-minded for my own good, I guess."

"You carry so much pain," Tamao whispered.

"I've gotten used to it," Hazuki shrugged with false bravado.

"I wish you didn't have to."

"No, it's better this way. There was a Hazuki once who didn't want to carry her pain anymore, so she did her best to end it." Hazuki paused, wondering how best to put this, and eventually decided to tell it like it was. "And she died."

Tamao looked up at her, startled, but then her eyes softened and she nodded slowly. "You really did, didn't you?"

"Yes," Hazuki nodded slowly, "I really did. But… something called me back to this world, and here I am."

For a long while, neither girl said a word, but then Tamao answered by leaning closer and softly, tenderly covering Hazuki's lips with her own.

"Oh my god, Tamao just…" Remon whispered, waving her hand excitedly. "We've got a kiss! We've got a kiss!"

Kizuna snatched the binoculars back to look for herself, and as she did, Remon's surge of excitement quickly collapsed into a cold, clenching feeling inside her.

"We've… got a kiss," she said in a flat voice.

After they broke, Hazuki regarded Tamao with a bemused smile. "What was that for?"

"I'm… glad you came back, Hazuki-chan," Tamao said brokenly, her eyes filling with tears.

Hazuki gathered the smaller girl into her arms and held her. "So am I, Tamao-chan. More than ever."

Not a word was exchanged between the Lulim third-years until they were back on dormitory grounds. Finally, Remon asked the question that she had been holding since moments after seeing that kiss. "What are we going to do?"

Kizuna chewed on her lower lip for a few moments. "We have to tell Chikaru-onee-sama."

Even though she knew this, Remon still fought half-heartedly. "Maybe what she doesn't know won't hurt her? Because this? This

will hurt her."

"I know. But she needs to know, and it would be better for her to hear it from us rather than from someone else, right?"

Remon nodded quickly. "Damn."

"Yeah."

"I… really liked Hazuki-senpai a lot, too."

"I know, I did too. I can't believe she'd do this."

They stopped at the main steps to the dormitory and looked dejectedly at one another. "When should we tell her? If we do it before dinner, there might be a scene."

"Maybe there *needs* to be a scene," Kizuna frowned.

"No, this needs to be done quietly," Remon insisted. "Chikaru-onee-sama deserves that. She'll know what to do."

"Yes, she will," Kizuna agreed. "Which is why we tell her *now* . She'll do what she needs to do."

Remon sighed heavily. "This sucks."

"There's a lot more to the story than what I've told you so far," Hazuki told Tamao as they wound their way back toward campus hand-in-hand. "For some of it I'll need Chikaru's help. A lot of the details are very… *intricate*, and some of it is just plain crazy."

Tamao nodded and smiled with a mix of shyness and assurance. "It seems that you've had a lot of crazy things happen to you, yes. But you can tell me anything."

"It'll take time, and probably several tries. I want to make sure you're comfortably following along before I tell you the parts that'll make

you think I'm insane."

"I don't think you need to worry about that," Tamao said with a small laugh. "You can… trust me with what's inside you."

Hazuki abruptly stopped walking and looked quizzically at Tamao. "Where did you hear that?"

"I'm… not sure, really," Tamao replied, looking a bit puzzled herself. "I think it's… something I heard in a dream?"

"A dream," Hazuki repeated. Had Tamao had one of *those* dreams the night that the meditation had gone haywire? Had she heard them clearly enough to remember some of their words?

Was there a greater connection than she knew?

They resumed their stroll up the hill, hands still clasped. Hazuki felt none of the exchange of energy that would have indicated the presence of *Souma* within Tamao, so it probably wasn't *that* . Something else to bring up with Chikaru later, Hazuki decided. After all, there always had to be complications, right?

"You've gone all thoughtful again," Tamao pointed out.

"Sorry. Old habit."

"Is there anything else I should know before we get back to school?" Tamao asked with a soft smile.

Hazuki smiled in return. "Well… you should probably know that Kizuna and Remon were following us earlier."

"Good evening, girls, come in," Chikaru smiled as she opened the door for her two third-year friends. "Have you come for help with that science homework after all?"

Remon glanced at Kizuna, waiting for her to take the lead, but her roommate was uncharacteristically quiet. Chikaru looked from one of them to the other. "My goodness, what happened? You two look like someone stole your kittens."

"Chikaru-onee-sama, there's something we need to tell you," Kizuna said at last.

"We don't want to," Remon put in, shaking her head.

"But we need to, even though it's going to hurt, because you're our sister, and we love you, and…" Kizuna broke off, miserably.

"And it's better that you hear it from us," Remon added, remembering Kizuna's words from earlier.

"Alright, ladies," Chikaru nodded, reaching out both hands to take one of theirs in each. "You can tell me anything."

After looking back at Remon and conferring silently, Kizuna pressed on. "We were out today doing some work for the bird-watching club when we saw Hazuki-senpai and Tamao-senpai walking off campus together, headed into town."

"Yes, that was my idea," Chikaru smiled. "A little time to themselves away from school."

Remon felt her stomach turn. Not only had those two betrayed her, they had done it while following her suggestion. How could this be anything but devastating?

"Well, we sort of… followed them," Kizuna said, all but squirming as she tried to explain further. "We just wanted to know what they were up to, and…"

"We saw them kissing on the beach," Remon blurted out.

For a long time, no one spoke, and both of the other girls stared fixedly at a blushing Remon. "I'm sorry, onee-sama, we didn't want to

tell you, but we had to. It's only fair to you."

Chikaru released both of their hands and turned toward the window, looking thoughtful. "Well," she said at length, "I must say I'm very disappointed."

"I'm sorry, onee-sama," Kizuna repeated.

"Very disappointed indeed," Chikaru continued before turning back to them. "They should *not* have let themselves be seen so easily. The beach? Hardly a private place."

Remon's jaw went slack. "Um, what?"

"Oh, rest assured I'll talk to them about it later. We weren't yet ready to be so… *public* with what's happening between the three of us."

"You're not… mad at them?" Kizuna asked, looking thunderstruck.

"Of course not," Chikaru grinned, coming up between them and putting an arm across each of their shoulders. "They deserve it, and we'll all three of us be in bed together soon enough anyway."

"You'll--" Remon tried to say, but that was as far as she could articulate.

"And I suppose if anyone was going to find out, it would be the two of you," Chikaru continued. "I think it goes without saying that we can trust you with this?"

"Um," Remon said in reply.

"I'll take that as a yes. As always, my darlings, my secrets are yours. So! Science homework, then?"

"No, that's okay, we'll handle it," Kizuna said, grabbing Remon's hand and quickly dragging her out of the room. "Thank you, onee-sama. Secret's safe with us. See you at dinner!"

"See you then!" Chikaru called after them.

Once the door was safely closed behind them, Kizuna took a long breath and looked at her wide-eyed roommate. "Remon-chan..? Did she just say..? Are they having a..?"

"I'm sorry, Kizuna-chan. I'm afraid I couldn't hear you over the sound of my head exploding."

Next: Sensei

BELATED DISCLAIMER: I do not own *Koihime Musou* . I simply think that Chou'un is… well, you know the rest.

Sensei

I'd like to say that it was clear to me - love triangle geometry

But in the end it's still a mystery - the placement of affection and the disarray

I gathered all the courage that it took - made that bed and took one last look

And you could hear the pages flapping in the wind-blown book of my days

-Indigo Girls

Part 13: Sensei

"So how is this going to *work*, anyway?" Kizuna mused, lying back on her bed and staring up at the ceiling.

Remon, mirroring her roommate's pose in her own bed, shook her head slowly. "I don't know. This goes well beyond *seme* and *uke* ."

"Is there a standard name for the third party? Maybe I should look it up online."

"Oh, yeah, like the library computers will get you to any of *those* websites."

"True. But maybe," Kizuna considered, waving one finger vaguely in Remon's direction, "it's standard to just have two of one and one of the other?"

"Or maybe the third switches roles depending on the situation?"

"Hmm, role-playing. Sounds like fun!"

Remon nodded enthusiastically. "Maybe. But right now, it definitely looks like a two- *seme* situation."

"You think so?"

"Oh, definitely!"

"Wait, I've got it!" Kizuna crowed. "Maybe it's like a sandwich! Two girls are bread, and the other one's the filling!"

"I like that! So who gets to be the filling?"

At that moment, there came a tap at the door, and Kagome let herself in. "Good evening, Kagome-chan!" Kizuna smiled, sitting up in bed. "Ready to go to dinner?"

Looking troubled, Kagome glanced from one girl to the other, then stared fixedly at the floor. "Um…"

"What's wrong, sweetie?" Remon asked, hopping down from her bed and kneeling before their younger schoolmate.

"Kagome-chan loves both of you very much," Kagome whispered.

"Aww, we love you too," Kizuna beamed.

Kagome nodded slowly. "But Kagome-chan is not ready to have *that* kind of relationship with you."

There was a long pause, and then Remon and Kizuna both burst out laughing and hugged Kagome between them. "Oh, Kagome-chan, we weren't talking about *us*," Kizuna giggled.

"Then who *were* you talking about?" Kagome asked, her eyes wide and unblinking as usual.

"Um, we really shouldn't," Remon frowned before Kizuna could say anything.

Kagome looked thoughtful for a moment, then the other two could all but see the light turn on. "Oh! You were talking about Chikaru-onee-sama and Hazuki-sama and Tamao-sama, then?"

At the conclusion of Monday's workout with the kendo team (the first since their victory at the tournament), Sensei Kojima clapped her hands three times, the signal for the kendouka to assemble in their standard three lines for final words. Hazuki took her place in the rear line with the rest of the seniors while Kojima faced the group.

"I'm very proud of this team," the sensei said first, surprising Hazuki. Normally she was much more reserved with her praise. "Your performance on Friday was the greatest success St. Spica has experienced in all my years as sensei. However, we cannot rest on this victory. You worked hard today, and I'm very pleased. Keep the focus that you just showed me, and this could be the greatest year this institution has ever experienced. You are dismissed."

As the students dispersed, leaving the gymnasium in twos and threes, Kojima spoke over the murmur of voices. "Azuma-kun, stay behind. I need to speak with you."

Hazuki stopped in her tracks and slowly turned back, nodding to herself as she did. This was hardly a surprise, after all. "Sensei," she bowed.

Kojima waited until the last of the stragglers left, shooting glares at a few of them to speed them along, then regarded Hazuki dispassionately. "Tell me something, Azuma-kun."

"Of course, Sensei."

"Why *exactly* did you throw your first-round match at last week's tournament?"

Chikaru was just unlocking the door to her dormitory room when she heard a voice calling from down the hall. "Chikaru-sama?"

"Hello, Tamao-chan," she smiled, turning to face the younger Miatoran. The smile faded, though, as she took in the troubled look on Tamao's face. "What is it?"

"Is it okay if we talk for a while? I'm… confused, and I don't know who else to talk to about this. Especially since it… well, it involves you."

"Of course. Come in, come in. Did you have another interesting dream?"

Tamao followed Chikaru inside. "No, no dreams. I probably would have been fine with *that*, really. There's just a lot in my head right now, and I need help figuring it out."

"I understand," Chikaru nodded, taking Tamao's hand and giving it a gentle pat. "Tell me, though: is this a tea talk or a cuddle talk?"

With a smile and a somewhat embarrassed shrug, Tamao replied "Well… I'm not exactly thirsty…"

"I'm waiting, Azuma-kun," Kojima said after a long silence in which Hazuki offered no explanation.

"I made a choice," Hazuki said at last. "I don't know if I can explain it to your satisfaction, Sensei, but I did what I thought was best."

"By intentionally losing to a vastly inferior opponent? How, pray tell, did you think that this was for the best? You could have beaten that girl with your eyes closed."

"Yes, Sensei, I could have."

"You could have beaten every girl in that tournament. If I were a gambling woman, I'd bet that you could have beaten every judge and sensei there as well."

"Possibly," Hazuki nodded.

"Then why *didn't* you?" Kojima snarled.

"Are you unsatisfied with St. Spica's performance, Sensei?"

"Not at all, Azuma-kun. I simply can't understand how it is that the fates have dropped a potential world-class athlete onto my team, far and away the most gifted kendouka I've ever coached, and yet when the time comes to perform… she holds back."

"Fighting in that tournament would have been pointless for me," Hazuki said evenly. "It would have proved nothing. The other girls on this team, however, had everything to gain from the competition."

"Ah, so it *has* occurred to you that you're that much better than your teammates, then?"

Hazuki sighed inwardly, but kept her voice neutral. "As a fighter, Sensei, yes, I am. I've sparred with each one of them multiple times. I know their tendencies and their weaknesses by heart."

Kojima crossed her arms. "So it appears we're back to the original question. *Why*, Azuma-kun? Why not mop the floor with the competition and bring honor to the school that gave you a chance? You *are* aware, I hope, that it was only on my recommendation that you were admitted to St. Spica?"

"Yes, Sensei, and I'm grateful for that. But I think there are better ways to honor St. Spica, and this team, than for *me* to win tournaments."

For a while, Kojima stared at her, then she drew her *shinai* from her sash and used it to point to the helmet Hazuki carried under her arm.

"Put on your *men*, Azuma-kun."

"For what reason, Sensei?"

"I want you to spar with me."

Tsubomi had just finished hanging up her gear and was about to get undressed for a shower when one of the team's first-years ran breathlessly into the locker room. "They're fighting! Hazuki-senpai and the sensei are fighting!"

After exchanging looks of wide-eyed shock with Yaya, Tsubomi followed the sudden flood of girls in various states of dress as they ran pell-mell back toward the gymnasium.

After five solid minutes of furious sparring in which Hazuki blocked every attack by Sensei Kojima, the two opponents circled one another, practice swords held at guard.

"First- *dan* master, eh?" Kojima said.

"That's as far as I've tested."

"No ambition to test for a higher rank?"

"No time."

Kojima advanced again, trying to make a swipe for Hazuki's armored wrists, but she did not find her mark. "You're quick."

"Thank you, Sensei."

"And yet there's something wrong here, Azuma-kun. Can you tell me what it is?"

"No, Sensei."

"You haven't attacked *once* . I asked you for a *spar*, child! Even your tryout was more forceful than this! You're holding back again!"

"I was holding back then, too," Hazuki said in a low voice.

With all the speed she could muster, Kojima came at her student with a series of three quick swipes and a thrust toward the throat-guard, punctuating each with a fierce cry. This backed Hazuki up a step, but again, not a single blow landed: each of them was expertly blocked or dodged.

"Then stop it, already!" she barked at Hazuki. "Reach inside yourself and turn up the dial!

"It's more of a switch, Sensei," the girl replied. "I only have two speeds, really."

"I don't care what you call it! Stop holding back and *fight* me, girl! You have the talent! Now *use* it!"

"To what end, Sensei?"

"Do you think I can't see how good you are? Come at me! Humiliate me! Pay me back for every time I've taken you to task! *Do* something!" She struck again, this time leaving herself intentionally open for counterattack, but once again, Hazuki did not take the bait, choosing instead to go on defending.

"I have neither reason nor desire to humiliate you, Sensei," Hazuki said quietly as the flurry of attacks ceased.

They returned to circling one another. Kojima brought her sword down, leaving herself unguarded. "I can see now why you and Kenjyo-kun get along so famously."

This, finally, seemed to get a reaction out of the girl, as Hazuki visibly bristled at this name. "What does *she* have to do with this?"

"You didn't know? She was the captain of the team until early last year, when I finally cut her. She *never* missed a chance to flaunt her skills over an outmatched opponent, including her teammates. I'm sure she would have *loved* to take a shot at me."

"I'm *nothing* like her," Hazuki scowled.

While the conversation did take place on Chikaru's bed, it was not quite the advertised "cuddle talk." Instead, Chikaru was reminded of the first day she met Hazuki, as she and Tamao lay side-by-side, hands clasped between them. A key difference, of course, was the absence of the shared presence of *Souma* .

"Tell me what's on your mind, Tamao-chan," Chikaru said softly.

"It's about yesterday," Tamao replied. "After Mass, spending the afternoon with you and Hazuki-chan and Nagisa-chan."

"Didn't you have a nice time?" Chikaru asked. After the aforementioned Sunday Mass, the four had shared an impromptu picnic by the lake, and Tamao had seemed happy enough to be in the company of her best friend and… well, whatever it was she considered Hazuki at this point. Deepening love interest?

"I did, but… there was something wrong. I couldn't put my finger on it at first, but all along, something just felt strange to me, and I think I know what it was now."

"Is there something wrong between you and Hazuki-chan?" Chikaru asked, her mind immediately flooding with concerns. Had Hazuki told her some of the more uncomfortable details about her past? Were outside influences thwarting them before anything could even start properly?

Tamao's answer, however, was not at all what she expected to hear. "No, I was going to ask *you* that. Is there something wrong between the two of *you* ?"

"Of course not," Chikaru replied immediately, aghast at the very idea.

"Then why…" Tamao broke off, then found her voice and continued. "You didn't touch her *once*, Chikaru-sama. The entire time we were together yesterday, you never even held her hand."

"That's not true, we…" Chikaru began, certain that she had felt Hazuki's energy that day as any other, but as she wracked her memory, it slowly dawned on her that Tamao was right: any physical contact the two had shared had been either before or after the picnic.

"No, you didn't. I didn't notice it at first, but after a while it was impossible *not* to, because it's never been like that with the two of you."

For one of the few times in her life at St. Lulim, Chikaru found herself at a loss for words. More than that, she found herself amazed that Tamao, even in the presence of the crush with whom she'd finally shared a first kiss, had been the one to notice this.

"You said that I wasn't going to get in your way," Tamao said wretchedly. "But there we were, one day after a first date, and it looked like *everything* had changed for you. I don't want that to happen."

Chikaru adjusted herself to put her free arm around Tamao and pull the girl into a reassuring hug, trying to continue in her role as supportive onee-sama even as her own mind felt itself in turmoil. Had she really done that and not noticed?

Was she giving up? Was she so easily backing away now that the match was made, returning to her place as neutral observer as she had so many times in the past?

"I'm sorry to have made you upset, Tamao-chan. Things are changing for the two of you, and I suppose I just wanted to… give you some space."

"Are you jealous of me, Chikaru-sama?" Tamao asked in a very small voice.

"No," Chikaru said, a little too quickly. She then took a breath and answered more honestly. "No, Tamao-chan, not jealous." Jealousy would mean a drive, and she didn't have that, did she?

"Really not?"

"Really not. Maybe a little sad, but that's been with me all along. It's hard not to wish that I could have given her everything she deserves, but I can't be jealous of you for being able to give her something I can't."

"Then I can't be jealous of what *you* give her either," Tamao whispered.

Chikaru studied the younger girl's face for a while. "Are you sure of that? Would it really not bother you *at all* if she and I went on holding hands and flirting and cuddling and staying up late meditating together? There's a lot of… *intimacy* to what we've had, even if it's not in the conventional sense. Our relationship thus far has always had a sensuous side, and I don't want you to feel threatened by that." She then let out a soft chuckle. "Hell, she's even seen me naked once."

"So have I," Tamao said quietly.

"Pardon me?"

Tamao looked up at Chikaru, caught between mischief and embarrassment. "Who was the one who rushed you out of your Carmen costume after your sprained ankle? I was so busy trying *not* to look at Nagisa-chan that I… sort of got an eyeful. You *were* still wearing the briefest underpants I've *ever* seen, but it was close enough."

"Ah, so you have, then," Chikaru giggled, having completely forgotten about that. Admittedly, her thoughts at the time had been far from wondering whether or not Tamao might be enjoying this show within the show down in the dressing room.

"I *can't* feel threatened by that," Tamao went on, finding her way back to the original subject. "What you have with her is part of who she is. She's not complete without you."

Chikaru smiled, impressed by this admission. She wondered how many girls would be able to say such a thing about their new-found love. She'd always considered Tamao stronger than she knew, but this was above and beyond anything she could have expected. Or indeed hoped for.

Nestling once again into Chikaru's shoulder, Tamao let out a soft sigh. "Sometimes I wish I could just be in love with both of you."

"Tamao, darling, I'm afraid the ship has already sailed on *that* rumor."

"I don't understand you," Kojima growled. "Don't you realize what you could do? You're what, sixteen? You could go further in this sport than any woman *ever* has! You could rewrite kendo history for women everywhere! I saw my former sensei challenge for eighth-*dan* once, Azuma-kun, and do you know what? You're better than *him*, and you're better than the *grandmaster* he fought!"

"Thank you, Sensei," Hazuki said, trying to keep her voice under control. The outburst was making everything clear: here was a woman who had devoted her entire life to her sport, and had no doubt hit barrier after barrier in advancing to her rank. Even now, as an obviously jaded teacher, she still held onto that dream, and could not understand how anyone could give up the chance to fight for what she herself had never achieved.

But Hazuki was not to be that fighter. As long as the *Souma* made it an uneven playing field, she could not, in good conscience, continue

to compete.

"So what do I have to do?" the sensei all but screamed, taking a wild hack at Hazuki's left side. "Do I have to insult your mother?" A blocked blow to the right. "Do I have to threaten to drop you from the team?" A shot at head-level, easily parried. "Do I have to compare you to Kenjyo-kun some more?" Another shot toward the helmet, also blocked. "Do I have to take back my recommendation and ask that your admission to this school be reconsidered?" Another thrust toward the throat-guard. " *What do I have to do to make you fight me?"*

Hazuki leaped back from this last lunge, reached up to strip off her *men*, and flung it away across the room, leaving her head and neck unguarded.

"You have to try to kill me."

After a few long, cozy moments, Tamao sighed and spoke again. "Do you think I'm strange for that, Chikaru-sama?"

"I'm in no position to call anyone strange, Tamao-chan, but which part do you mean?"

"The part of me that wishes I could be with you both?"

"You know that can't happen, Tamao-chan," Chikaru smiled softly. "Not the way you're thinking, anyway."

"I'm sorry, that must sound unforgivably weird."

"Not as such. I don't have anything against the *idea* of three people being in love. It's bound to be more complicated, of course, even without taking society into account. Finding long-term compatibility between *two* people is challenging enough. Having three people that can each be in love with the other two as individuals, as well as the other two as a pair?" She smiled again. "Complicated."

"Well, I'm *already* in love with the two of you as a pair," Tamao admitted. "That's why I came to talk to you. I can't bear the idea of there being *anything* that comes between you, much less *being* that thing."

"I suppose this explains why you've been slow in your pursuit of our dear Hazuki?" Chikaru teased. "After last year, I find it difficult to believe that *anything* could stop you from chasing the object of your desire."

"That's exactly why," Tamao said in all seriousness. "It's not just in my dream, you know. You two *shine* together. You're each so beautiful, but together, you make the whole world green."

"Green?" Chikaru asked, giving Tamao a look of curious amusement. Was this simply a poetic metaphor? "Why do you say green, Tamao-chan?"

Tamao looked a little uncomfortable under the sudden scrutiny. "You'll think it's silly."

"I'm in no position to call anyone silly either. Tell me."

"It's just that… you two are very affectionate with each other, and even though it feels like I ought to be jealous of that, I'm not. Any time I see you touch, or hold hands, the whole world just feels green and growing around you, like fresh grass, or trees in springtime. You both look so… *alive* ." Tamao looked intently into Chikaru's eyes. "Don't let me take that away from you, Chikaru, *please* ."

"Okay, okay, if you insist," Chikaru relented with a soft chuckle. "On one condition."

"Name it."

Chikaru grinned wickedly. "I reserve the right to roll my eyes dramatically whenever you kiss in front of me. And to leave as soon as the heavy petting kicks in, of course."

"It's a deal," Tamao laughed, then hugged the older girl tightly.

"You have so much to offer her, Tamao-chan. I won't hold anything back if you don't."

"I won't," Tamao nodded against her. "I only wish I could offer more to you, as well."

"Silly Tamao," Chikaru smiled. "You make her happy, and that makes *me* happy."

"Chikaru-sama deserves more than someone else's happiness," Tamao whispered. "You deserve to be truly *made* happy."

Chikaru tilted her head to one side and cocked an eyebrow at Tamao's sudden return to seriousness. "Are you flirting with me again, Tamao-chan?"

Tamao once more looked into Chikaru's eyes, this time with palpable nervousness. "Chikaru-sama, I have a question."

"Ask me anything."

Nodding, Tamao made a visible effort to get the words out. "May I… may I kiss you?"

"No, Tamao-chan," Chikaru said as gently as she could. "I'm afraid it doesn't get to be that easy, and doing that can only serve to confuse things for you even more. But we'll make this work together, the three of us. Okay?"

"I'm sorry," Tamao sighed. "I told you this was confusing. Hazuki-chan would think I'm a terrible person for asking that of you."

"Mmm, I'm not so sure about *that*," Chikaru mused. "Her recent life experiences have actually left her incredibly open-minded. She knows first-hand where confusion can take you."

"You just… deserve something wonderful," Tamao said in an almost resigned voice. "I'm sorry for being so presumptuous."

"It's fine, my darling. I'm flattered, really, but you should save that for the third member of our little circle. She can appreciate it a lot more than I can." Here, the wicked grin returned. "Besides, I made a bet with Shizuma at the beginning of last year that I'd graduate without ever being kissed, and I can't very well back down on that now, can I?"

Kojima came to a halt, and dropped her guard. "Kill you..?" she asked in an uncharacteristically quiet voice.

"If you want me at full-speed, you'll have to try to kill me," Hazuki said fiercely. "Otherwise, I'm going to hold back. I *have* to."

"What sort of life did you lead before you came here?" Kojima asked, her voice still oddly quiet.

"One that involves too many long stories for me to get into now."

Kojima took off her own *men*, then, and gave Hazuki a look that seemed almost sympathetic. "Did you hurt someone while fighting, Azuma-kun?"

Hazuki nodded, deciding that this was close enough to the truth. "Sometimes it scares me that I'm as good at this as I am."

"You know, from Kenjyo-kun, that would have sounded like bragging, but… you really mean that, don't you?"

"Yes, Sensei. I do."

"Skills that advanced faster than your discipline, perhaps?"

"No, Sensei. It's my discipline that allows me to hold back. I could probably win a lot of matches for you even then, but I'll never be able

to give you my full effort."

Kojima regarded her carefully. "Answer me this, Azuma-kun. If I enter you in another tournament, will you lose in the first round again?"

"Yes, Sensei," Hazuki nodded. "I think I will."

"In that case," Kojima sighed, "you are no longer a member of this team."

Hazuki held her breath for a moment, then bowed deeply. "Very well, Sensei. I'm sorry." She then turned to retrieve her *men* from where it had landed.

"I'm not finished," Kojima said sternly, bringing Hazuki up short. She turned again to face the sensei, giving her a puzzled look.

"As sensei of one of St. Spica's athletic teams," Kojima went on, "it is my prerogative, however, to appoint a student as my assistant." She then cracked the first smile Hazuki had ever seen from her. "So, Azuma- *san*, would you like to help me teach these girls, and rewrite the history of the sport in a different way?"

"Sensei," Hazuki breathed, not certain she could believe what she was hearing.

"If you can keep doing for them what you did in the last tournament, I think you'll more than live up to my past recommendation," Kojima nodded. "In the meantime, it would give me great pleasure to work with you one-on-one sometime. Perhaps I could help you find a few more settings on that switch of yours, and perhaps you could help me train for that fifth- *dan* I've never been able to get."

"It would be an honor, Sensei," Hazuki said, giving another low bow.

"Very good. You'll report to practices fifteen minutes early to go over the day's workout with me. You'll continue working with the team, but

your role will be more instructional. And you'll notify me at once if you change your mind and wish to be activated again."

"Of course, Sensei. Thank you."

Kojima's face then returned to her characteristic annoyed scowl. "Now, for your first duty as my assistant, you're to tell all the girls trying to watch us through the door-cracks to get back to the showers."

"Yes, Sensei. Right away."

"And don't tell *any* of them you saw me smile."

"Wouldn't dream of it, Sensei."

Next: Questions

Questions

FOREWORD: (sing it with me, now!)

Happy Birthday To You

Happy Birthday To You

Happy Birthday Dear Ninemil

Hope You Like The Last Scene In This New Chapter!

(Yeah, I was stuck for a rhyme.)

Rain soaked and voice choked, like silent screaming in a dream

I searched for our absolute distinction

Not content to bow or bend to the whims of culture that swoop like vultures

Eating us away to our extinction

-Indigo Girls

Part 14: Questions

"Do you ever wonder if this world is all there is?"

It was late Wednesday afternoon, and Hazuki, Chikaru and Tamao were enjoying some quiet time together, lying in the grass and looking up at the increasingly cloudy sky. The second session of the Self-Defense Club, as it was now officially called, had been another great success, pulling in double the number of participants (including

the younger Etoile, to Hazuki's partial surprise), and a bit of rest was in order before dinner. The talk thus far had been minimal, mostly focusing on interestingly shaped clouds, but picking out individual forms was quickly becoming impossible as the sky continued to grow more threatening.

Tamao rolled her head to one side to gaze at Chikaru, who had asked the question. "Do you mean the afterlife, Chikaru-sama?"

"Not really. That's a completely different topic. I mean this world that we're living in here and now. Do you ever wonder if there could be other worlds like ours?"

Hazuki arched an eyebrow in Chikaru's direction, wondering where exactly the Lulim president was trying to steer them.

"Other worlds… like in space?" Tamao ventured. "Other stars with their own planets?"

"Not even that, really," Chikaru said with a slow shake of the head. "You're a storyteller, Tamao-chan. Don't you ever wonder if there are other worlds where the stories are true?"

"You mean 'what-if' worlds?"

"For starters, sure. Let's say… a world exactly like our own, but where… we were all boys, and these were academies for young men."

"I don't really want to imagine that one," Hazuki snorted.

"Neither do I," Tamao agreed, shooting the Spican a smile.

"Fine, fine. Then a world where you and Nagisa-chan served as Etoile together as the best of friends while Nagisa fought her way through a different love triangle with Shizuma and… say, Miyuki."

"Poor Nagisa-chan," Tamao frowned. "If it's not one thing, it's another."

"You get my point, though," Chikaru giggled. "Parallel dimensions. Infinite worlds like and unlike our own, where anything is possible. Is that a concept that appeals to you as a writer, Tamao-chan?"

Hazuki said nothing. Was Chikaru trying to prime the pump, as it were? Was it time to have *that* talk with Tamao? Hazuki had been avoiding the topic for the past few days, though admittedly, she had not had much time alone with Tamao since the academic week had begun, and she hadn't given much thought as to how she should even begin. Apparently Chikaru had, however.

"It's an interesting concept," Tamao considered, "but it's so… *extraordinary* . What evidence do we have? How would you know those worlds are *there* based what we know? I mean, Astraea is an incredible place, but compared to what you're talking about, it's downright mundane."

Chikaru propped herself up on her elbows and grinned across Tamao toward Hazuki. She then looked up and seemingly addressed her next words to the clouds. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Tamao-chan, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

"Shakespeare," Tamao smiled.

"Mmm hmm," Chikaru nodded. "This world isn't as ordinary as all that. There are miraculous things that happen all around us, if you know where to look."

"Now you sound like one of the Sisters."

"Ouch," Hazuki chuckled.

"No offense taken," Chikaru said airily. "But not even *those* sorts of miracles. You've seen them, Tamao-chan; you just don't recognize them yet."

After a pause, Tamao sat up and regarded Chikaru with a curious smile. "What brought this on, Chikaru-sama?"

"She's been hanging around me too much," Hazuki smirked. "My insanities are rubbing off."

"Hardly," Chikaru said with a chortle. "I had those long before I met you. Actually, I was thinking about my sister, and what a miracle *she* was to us all. It's got me all metaphysically-minded today."

Hazuki furrowed her brow, still uncertain as to whether or not this was leading somewhere.

"You know," Tamao said quietly, "I never made the connection before, but that's something else the two of you have in common. Both of you have lost sisters."

"Mmm, you have no idea *how much* we have in common in *that* regard, Tamao-chan."

"What do you mean?"

Chikaru again looked to Hazuki, this time with both eyebrows raised in silent question.

"Go ahead," Hazuki nodded. She was ready to trust Chikaru to do this the right way; she only hoped Tamao was ready to hear it.

Turning back to Tamao, Chikaru continued. "What do you remember about Naoko?"

"Regrettably, not very much," Tamao said, furrowing her brow. "I was only in my second year when she… when she left, and I only ever spoke to her two or three times."

"What do you remember about those times, then?"

Tamao looked away, her eyes growing distant, as though trying to capture the moments in her memory. "I was so lonely here," she said, her voice just over a whisper. "But she had a smile… an amazing smile that said more to me than any words could. I told her about how desperately alone I felt, and she would hold my hand, and

smile at me, and she didn't have to say a word. I knew she was telling me that my loneliness would end, and as long as she was there, I had no reason to doubt it." She smiled sadly. "She was gone before it ever happened, but that was why I was so certain Nagisa-chan was the one to end my loneliness. And in many ways she was, because she brought so much happiness to my life, but… I see now that I may have had a little longer to wait for the rest."

"That sounds pretty… *extraordinary*, Tamao-chan," Chikaru said with a quirky grin. "How could you tell all of that when she never said a word to you?"

"She was your sister, Chikaru, you know what she was like! The first time I sat with her, she took my hand and put it against her heart, and… I felt so warm. It was like…" She trailed off suddenly.

"It was like what, Tamao-chan?"

"Like the whole world… was green…" Tamao finished, turning a wondering look on Chikaru.

Hazuki watched this exchange, not certain of its implications. She knew Tamao and Chikaru had shared another deep talk while she'd been at kendo on Monday, so it probably had something to do with that. Green was the color of *Souma*, of course: was Tamao actually becoming aware of it?

Rather than elaborate, though, Chikaru continued. "Now, what do you remember about how Naoko left us?"

"Just what everyone else heard," Tamao said, still looking uncertain. "I know she left a note saying that she was dying and then disappeared."

"Not quite," Chikaru corrected her. "She left a note saying that her time on this world was coming to an end, and that she was taking herself away so that we wouldn't have to see her leave us."

"What are you saying, Chikaru-sama?" Tamao asked quietly.

"This is where the extent of what I have in common with Hazuki-chan comes in. You see, Naoko might have left us that night, but she didn't die. She *moved on* ." At this point she turned her eyes from Tamao to Hazuki. "And eventually she became someone else's adoptive sister."

Tamao whirled around to stare, thunderstruck, at Hazuki. "Your sister? The sister you fell in love with was Naoko-sama?"

"To me she was Hatsumi," Hazuki nodded. "But yes, they were the same."

There was a long pause, and Hazuki looked from Tamao to Chikaru before realizing that it was her turn to pick up the narration. "She came into my life and… changed me, just like she changed things here, and then she left. I wasn't ready for that, though, so I tried to follow her. It was a long time before I finally found her, but in the end I only got to spend one more day with her. Just long enough for her to explain to me why it was she had to leave, and… to kiss me goodbye." She smiled wryly. "My first kiss, and it was as good as a farewell."

"I'm so sorry," Tamao whispered.

"Don't be. In her own roundabout way, she was the one who encouraged me to come here and start my life over with another of her sisters. I never would have met either of you if it hadn't been for her." Hazuki closed her eyes. "As difficult as it was to lose her *twice*, I can be grateful to her now. For this."

"Hazuki-chan," Tamao sighed, then impulsively leaned in as if to kiss her.

"Plain sight, children," Chikaru reminded them, causing Tamao to back away, blushing.

"Anyway, we need to work on finding times to kiss other than when I've just told you about something devastating from my past," Hazuki suggested with a half-grin.

"Right," Tamao grinned sheepishly. "I'm sorry, it's just so hard to believe that Naoko-sama is alive somewhere. It's…"

"Extraordinary?" Chikaru offered.

'Yes," Tamao agreed, her face returning to the puzzled expression she'd worn when talking about the world being green.

"More things in heaven and earth, Tamao-chan," Chikaru smiled.

Tamao nodded, but then looked uncomfortable. "It makes me sad to think that she lied to us, though."

"But she didn't," Chikaru said softly.

"No, she said she was leaving this world, when she was just leaving to live with Hazuki-chan."

"She didn't lie," Chikaru insisted, giving Tamao the tiniest smile.

"But…" Tamao said, shaking her head. She then turned to Hazuki. "How long did she live with you, then?"

Hazuki exchanged another glance with Chikaru. What they had said thus far could be explained away, but they were now at the point where anything further simply defied logic. Chikaru's expression said it all: she would leave it to Hazuki to decide whether or not to continue.

Mindful of the trust she wanted to build with the girl staring at her, Hazuki told the truth. "As long as I can remember. We grew up together."

"But… you're the same age as me. You would have been thirteen when she left Astraea."

"I know," Hazuki nodded. "And yet we were children together, just as she and Chikaru were."

"How is that possible?"

"It's not," Chikaru put in. "Not by any earthly way of thinking. But at the same time, Tamao, you must know that we'd never lie to you."

"Never," Hazuki insisted.

Looking more and more unsettled, Tamao turned from one of them to the other. "No, I know you wouldn't," she said in a bare whisper. "But… what does that mean? Who was she?"

"Something extraordinary," Hazuki said softly.

"I always liked to think of her as an angel," Chikaru smiled. "Someone who came to touch our lives and make our worlds green, and maybe to show us how to do the same, if we so choose. But whatever you want to call her, Tamao-chan, you know in your heart she was something more than we are. You looked into her eyes. You felt her warmth inside you when she put your hand over her heart. And she was right about one thing, certainly."

"What… what's that?"

"That you wouldn't have to be lonely forever."

Hazuki smiled in spite of Tamao's continued unease. Chikaru certainly had more faith in Eve than she herself did if she thought that this was really part of some grand plan. Nevertheless, it certainly seemed to be working out that way, regardless of intent.

"I know this is difficult, Tamao-chan" Chikaru went on, "but it's best if you don't try to think too much about how it could work in a logical world, because our world is anything but. More things in heaven and earth, my love. More things indeed."

They sat in silence for several long minutes. Tamao edged closer to Hazuki and extended her hand, which Hazuki took in both of hers, finding it cold to the touch. She held it against her and tried to rub some warmth back into it.

Finally, Chikaru stood and looked at the darkening clouds. "It's starting to rain," she said simply. "We should go back inside."

That said, she offered a hand to help Tamao stand, and the three of them, hand in hand, made their way back to the dormitory as the first drops began to fall from above.

They managed to get inside before the rain began to fall in earnest, but still mutually agreed that they should change out of their wet clothes before dinner. Chikaru was the first to part company with them, and then Hazuki walked Tamao back to her room.

"Funny, we finally get to wear our summer uniforms this week, and a storm rolls in," Tamao smiled, making an obvious effort to keep things light.

"And once again, I'd rather have one of yours," Hazuki chuckled. "I never thought the skirts could get any shorter than Spica's winter uniforms. I should have known better, huh?"

Tamao opened her door, then paused, looking thoughtful. "Hazuki-chan, that was a lot to take in."

"I know it was."

"Was this one of the things that you said would make me doubt your sanity?"

"Sort of. There are actually parts that make even less sense than this, but there's no need to talk about that now."

"I understand," Tamao nodded. "And I really want to believe you, because Chikaru was right: I know neither of you would ever be dishonest with me. But it's still so…"

"You don't have to explain. I lived through it, and sometimes I can't believe it either."

"Thank you for trusting me enough to talk about it, though."

Hazuki smiled slowly. "I trust you with what's inside me."

Tamao returned the smile upon hearing these familiar words. "I'll see you at dinner."

After taking an exaggerated peek both ways down the hall, Hazuki placed one hand under Tamao's chin, tilted her face up just slightly, and leaned in to kiss her. "See you then."

"Hmm, non-dramatic kisses," Tamao grinned. "I could get used to those."

"Me, too."

Tamao went inside, the smile winning the war with confusion on her pretty face, and Hazuki took a deep breath and headed back to her room in the Spica wing, feeling pretty good about this first foray into introducing her to the Really Odd Stuff. The whole coming from another world and assuming the life and memories of a dead counterpart thing could wait for another day.

Once back in her room, Hazuki got changed into a dry uniform, and was about to head out for the aforementioned dinner when she had the oddest feeling that she should check her phone. Puzzled at what could have brought that on (as no one had her number except for her parents and Shizuma), she opened her top desk drawer and fished it out.

Sure enough, the display showed a new voice message.

"Great, now the *Souma* gives heightened awareness of voice mail?" she muttered to herself as she dialed in.

Given the limited choice of potential callers, it came as no surprise that the voice she heard was Shizuma's. "Hello, Hazuki-chan. This is Shizuma, and it's early afternoon on Wednesday. I was wondering if I could ask you to come to Nagisa and Tamao's room this evening at eight o'clock? She and I generally do a web-chat on Wednesdays, and I'd like you to be there tonight if you can make it. And since I don't know how to reach Chikaru, could you invite her to come as well? Thank you, Hazuki-chan. I'll see you tonight, I hope."

Hazuki gave the phone a puzzled frown, though of course Shizuma would not be able to see it. There had been something odd to the tone of her voice: she sounded almost nervous for some reason. What in the world could *this* be all about?

As Hazuki left her room, however, the inquisitive mood quickly faded as she found herself alone with Kaname, who was just coming down the hall, probably on her way to the dining hall herself.

"President Kenjyo-sama," she bowed, frostily.

"Azuma-kun," Kaname nodded.

They held one another's eyes for a moment, then wordlessly continued down the hall, walking in stride with one another.

As Hazuki could have expected, it was Kaname who spoke first, giving the younger girl a smirk. "I hear you were dropped from the kendo team."

"So they tell me," Hazuki replied. "I understand that puts me in good company, but at least one of us will be at the next practice."

"Well, you know what they say. Those who can't do, teach."

"Nicely done. Only took you two days to come up with that one."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Kaname muttered, her expression darkening.

"Enjoying what, talking to you? Hardly. I'm getting thoroughly tired of trying to be polite to you, President Kenjyo-sama. It gives me a sharp pain in my self-respect."

They took the stairs down to the main hall. Other students were nearby, but they kept their voices low. "You know very well what I'm talking about. Did you enjoy letting your Lulim lapdog loose on me?"

"What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?"

"It means that I'm not afraid of her, and I'm not afraid of you. I'll see the back of you before this year's over. You can count on that."

"My, my. Look at you, going all Draco Malfoy on me."

Kaname grabbed Hazuki's shoulder and spun her around to meet her face to face. "I warned you that you didn't want me as an enemy, Azuma-kun."

"And yet you doggedly continued to make yourself one, so why *exactly* did you bother to warn me if you were *that* determined all along?"

"You have no idea who you're dealing with," Kaname scowled.

"My God, no wonder you and Momomi are a couple. You both constantly speak in cliches."

"Leave her out of this. This is between you and me."

Hazuki arched an eyebrow at her unwanted nemesis. "Well, then between you and me, here's a fun fact for you to consider. I know how to break someone's wrist in such a way that it'll never *quite* heal to full strength for, say, playing tennis."

"And now you're threatening me?" Kaname said, actually smiling at the reaction.

"I wouldn't call it a threat so much as a warning, and something to ponder in your spare time. Do you *really* want to put me in a position where I feel like I haven't got anything to lose?"

While Kaname chewed on that, Hazuki went on. "This is *also* a warning. Take your hand off my shoulder. Now."

A few tense moments passed, then Kaname removed the hand in question. "Thank you," Hazuki nodded. "Now let me be clear with you, President Kenjyo-sama. I never wanted *any* of this, but now I want it over and done with. Our lives never have to cross. You want to see the back of me? Fine. All you have to do is graduate. We can get through this year and be on our merry way without speaking a word to one another. In fact, I'll be happy to start that right now. The rest is up to you."

She tried to walk away, but Kaname kept pace. "I'd love the chance to see what you're really made of," the older girl growled.

"Good Lord, are you *still* talking?" Hazuki sighed as they emerged into the dining hall.

"I'd love to meet you one-on-one and see how tough you *really* are."

Hazuki turned to Kaname and gave her a bright smile. "That's a *wonderful* idea, President Kenjyo-sama," she said, intentionally raising her voice over the murmur of the mostly-filled dining hall. "It would be an *honor* to spar with you sometime! We'll have to set a date soon!"

She punctuated the overly cheerful words with a deep bow. Every eye in the room was immediately upon them, and the low buzz of conversation went quiet.

"Certainly, Azuma-kun," Kaname said stiffly, shooting daggers from her eyes even as she smiled. "I'm looking forward to it."

As the class president stalked off toward the head table, Hazuki took the first seat she could find. Moments later, someone plopped down opposite her, and she looked up to see Yaya smiling widely at her from across the table.

"So… are things still serious between you and Chikaru-sama? 'Cause I think I *might* just be in love with you."

By five minutes after eight, Nagisa was beginning to get concerned. "Still nothing," she said, scrunching her brow as she gazed into the screen of her new laptop.

"I'm sure she's just running late, Nagisa-chan," Tamao assured her.

Nagisa looked up at the small crowd gathered in their room. Chikaru and Hazuki were sitting on the edge of her bed, while Tamao sat on her own, scribbling away in one of her notebooks. "She's usually so punctual, though. And it must be important if she asked you all to be here."

"Interference from the storm, maybe?" Chikaru suggested.

Hazuki shook her head. "That might slow down the feed, but unless it's disconnected you entirely, it shouldn't keep you from--"

She was interrupted by a knock at the door. Concerned that it might be the Sister, Nagisa closed the laptop and put a cloth over it: while wireless broadband was not *technically* against the rules, she had no desire to push the edges of the envelope in that particular manner. By the time she had things properly hidden, Tamao was answering the door.

"Oh..! Hello, Shizuma-sama!"

Nagisa looked up, wide-eyed, as Tamao opened the door wide to let a sopping wet Shizuma inside. Her silver mane was plastered to her face, and her very fetching (and probably very expensive) black dress was soaked through, clinging to her like a second skin.

"Shizuma," she whispered, crossing the room quickly, but pulling up short at the incongruous sight of her. "What happened to you?"

"Would you believe I forgot about the gates locking down at curfew and had to park over by Lulim?" Shizuma smiled wearily. "Then I had to use one of Amane's old methods to sneak back onto the dormitory grounds."

Tamao, by this time, was already returning from the bathroom with an armful of towels and a robe. "Here you are, Shizuma-sama."

"Thank you, Tamao-chan," Shizuma smiled, wrapping her hair in one of the towels as she turned to acknowledge the other two. "Hello, Hazuki-chan, Chikaru-chan. Glad to see you both."

"I really want to tease you about not having an umbrella on a night like this," Chikaru said with a half-smile, "but my goodness, you poor *thing* ."

"Well, it wasn't raining back at University," Shizuma shrugged. "Serves me right for not checking ahead."

Nagisa finally found herself enough to voice one of the myriad questions swirling inside her head. "But… it's Wednesday. You have classes tomorrow."

"Some things are more important than classes," Shizuma said with a playful smile as she vigorously rubbed her hair dry. "Thank you again, Tamao-chan, I needed that. Now, if you'll all excuse me, I won't be a moment."

"Shall I make tea?" Tamao called as Shizuma went into the bathroom and pulled the door to.

"Please do," came Shizuma's voice from inside. Moments later, though, before Tamao could even put a kettle on, she re-emerged, wrapped up in Tamao's robe (which was more than a little too small for her) while her hair stood out almost like a fright wig.

"Not exactly what I had in mind for this moment," she said with an amused roll of her shining green eyes. She extended one hand to Nagisa, then. "Hello, my love."

Nagisa took the cold hand in both of hers. "Shizuma, why are you here?" she whispered, feeling dazed by her girlfriend's wholly unexpected presence in the room.

"Aren't you glad to see me?" Shizuma teased.

"Always! I just wasn't expecting it!"

"Some things *also* can't be done with webcams, my sweet. Or shouldn't, certainly."

There was something happening here: Nagisa was certain of it, but her mind was still too much in shock to try to piece it together herself. "Shizuma-sama," she whispered, falling back into their old formality.

After looking around the room to give everyone a smile, Shizuma turned her full attention to Nagisa. "There's something I need to talk to you about, Nagisa, and once I decided, I knew I couldn't wait another day. I wish the weather would have cooperated more, but in the end, it doesn't matter." She smiled as she ran a hand back through her hair, trying to flatten it down a little.

Nagisa, lost in those eyes yet again, did not answer, so Shizuma continued. "When I went away to University, Nagisa, I was terrified that I would lose you. Not to anyone specific," here she shot a wink at Tamao, "but just to… absence. I thought you'd drift away from me, or that you'd begin to think of what we had as a dream from your past."

"I could never…" Nagisa gasped, amazed that Shizuma could have feared such a thing.

"I know that now," Shizuma nodded, "but there was more to be afraid of than just that. We're lucky, Nagisa. Our families accept who we are and what we have, at least for now, but I can't promise you that being with me will be easy once we're both in that unforgiving world outside Astraea Hill. Here, we have something beautiful and romantic, and we have friends to celebrate it with. There, we're just *different*, and there are so many people who will take great pleasure in reminding us of that, every day of our lives. So that's pretty terrifying, too."

"I know," Nagisa whispered. "It's hard not to be scared of that."

"But in the end," Shizuma said, her voice hushed, "I love *you* more than I'm afraid of *them* . While I thought you might drift away this year, you've only gotten closer to me, and I'm grateful to the help our friends have given us in that regard." She offered a smile to Hazuki, then turned back to Nagisa and took a deep breath. "I pictured this moment many times, Nagisa. And even though I never thought it would happen in your dorm room while I was wearing a bathrobe… I simply don't care, because I won't wait another minute."

Nagisa's breath caught in her throat as Shizuma knelt before her and produced a small box from the pocket of the robe. "Aoi Nagisa, in the presence of these friends and loved ones, I ask for…" She stumbled over the words, then her face broke into a huge grin. "Please… marry me, Nagisa."

Time held its breath as Nagisa stared into Shizuma's eyes, scarcely noticing the shimmering ring in the now-opened jewelry box. She felt hot tears spilling down her cheeks as her sight blurred. "Yes," she said in a choked whisper, then repeated it in a joyful voice. "Yes, yes, of course I will!"

Shizuma slipped the ring onto her finger, then Nagisa collapsed into her embrace, laughing. Soon the world became a blur of hugs,

kisses and congratulations as she found herself passed from one friend to another, ending with Tamao, who was shaking with sobs.

"Tamao-chan?" she whispered, suddenly fearful that she was breaking her dearest friend's heart all over again.

When they broke, however, there was no mistaking the brilliant smile that shone through Tamao's tears. "I'm so happy for you, Nagisa-chan."

"You'll be there with me, won't you? You'll stand beside me?"

Obviously overcome beyond the capacity for words, Tamao simply nodded, then leaned in to kiss Nagisa on the cheek. "It would be the greatest honor," she whispered.

They hugged again, then Nagisa turned back to Shizuma as Tamao found herself wrapped between a tearful Hazuki and a beaming Chikaru.

"Thank you, my love," Shizuma whispered.

Nagisa finally took a moment to look at the ring on her finger: it looked like two bands entwined, one of dark gold and one of shining platinum. "It's beautiful," she smiled, but then a random thought darkened her face. "But the uniform code…"

"Sadly, as your former Etoile, I'm aware of the rule," Shizuma sighed melodramatically, then reached into the box to pull out a silver chain. "So you can wear it under your uniform with this. It's long enough that it should hang next to your heart. One of my favorite places to be."

Nagisa looked at the chain, then down at herself. "More like right between my breasts," she giggled.

"Yes, well, that's one of my favorite places to be, too." Shizuma admitted, giving her a broad wink. She then turned to the other three,

who were still standing in a loose cuddle as they watched. "I'm honored that you could be here," she bowed. "You can't know how much you've meant to me, all three of you, for all you've done for Nagisa, for the two of us… and for me." She said the last directly to Chikaru, who nodded knowingly.

"Congratulations to you both," the Lulim president smiled, then made a business of taking both Hazuki and Tamao by the hand and pulling them toward the door. "In honor of the newly engaged, however, I think some time alone is merited, so I do believe Hazuki, Tamao and I will be going to my room now to have some hot lesbian sex."

As Hazuki opened the door, Chikaru grinned back at the stunned couple. "And by 'lesbian sex,' of course, I mean *tea* . But it *will* be hot."

Next: Butterflies

Butterflies

I see this world battered but not broken

There's a fallow heart, it's waiting on a sowing hand

You can grow what you want, but one day it's gonna rise up

So plant what you need to make a better stand

-Indigo Girls

Part 15: Butterflies

Remon looked up at Kizuna as her roommate slapped a small stack of papers onto her desk. "What's this?" she asked.

"I've got results, if you're interested."

"Bring it on," Remon grinned, quickly shoving her homework aside as she peered closely at the first sheet, which showed a three-colored pie chart.

"Okay, this one is just the basic split from our combined sightings of all three of them being together, with a time period of the two weeks of confirmed threesome action," Kizuna explained, pointing out each of the sections in turn. "I used house colors, so the green is for Tamao being in the middle, blue is for Hazuki, and red is for Chikaru-onee-sama. You'll note that Tamao is most often the one in the middle at fifty-six percent, then Hazuki at thirty-three, and lastly Chikaru-onee-sama at only eleven."

"Makes sense," Remon nodded. "I figured our onee-sama would be bread most of the time, but I'm surprised that Tamao gets that much

more filling time than Hazuki! I had Tamao pegged for a *seme* all the way after last year."

"Ah, but Tamao's the newcomer, so they're probably making an extra effort to give her as much attention as possible."

"Ah, good point. So what's next?"

Kizuna turned to the next page, which showed a simple X-Y graph with one axis being "Times As Filling" and the other being hours of the day. Three tracings peaked and valleyed their way from left to right, again in the three house colors. "Skewing it by hour shows some interesting trends, though. It looks like Tamao gets most of her filling time in the mornings and mid-afternoons, while Hazuki gets late mornings and late afternoons, and Chikaru-onee-sama has a noticeable spike as filling toward the end of the day."

"That's probably because the times we see them late they're usually on their way to Chikaru-onee-sama's room."

"True. I'm not sure about the rest of the trends, though. Maybe Hazuki needs a little extra love after kendo practice and teaching her clubs, and Tamao needs a little bit of morning filling to remind herself each and every day how damned lucky she is."

"Sounds reasonable. Next?"

Kizuna turned the page. "Venn diagram. This is when I started to incorporate all of our sightings, not just the ones of the three of them. So each of these circles is one of the three girls, the sections where two intersect are sightings of two but not the other, and the middle, where all three intersect, is when we've recorded seeing the full threesome. Each dot on the graph is an individual sighting."

Remon let out a low whistle. "They're all together more than not lately, aren't they? Except for Chikaru-onee-sama."

"Yeah, the data on her is bound to be skewed," Kizuna nodded, pointing to the large number of "solo" sightings of their president compared to the others, "but that's obviously because of our clubs, and because she's at our school. We're bound to see her more frequently."

"Maybe we need to ask Chiyo and Tsubomi to collect data for us at the other schools."

"What, and betray our onee-sama's trust?" Kizuna asked, giving her roommate the lightest of bonks to the back of the head. "Remember, this is all still hush-hush."

"Sorry, forgot myself for a minute there," Remon smirked. "Hey, what are the ones with stars next to them? They mostly seem to be with Tamao sightings."

"Appearances by Nagisa, of course. We shouldn't discount her role here, after all. You know how Tamao feels about her, and now that she's gone poly on us, it may just be a matter of time."

Remon peered over the frames of her glasses at Kizuna. "Please. Nagisa's got Shizuma!"

"Yeah, but we're talking about our petite poet, our kick-ass kensei and our frickin' onee-sama in one bed here," Kizuna grinned, her eyes twinkling. "That's a *lot* of temptation!"

Nodding slowly, Remon scanned the three printouts, then looked up at Kizuna with an odd smile. "We're sick puppies. You *know* that, right?"

"Yeah, isn't it fun?"

"Thank you for taking the time to do this," Hazuki smiled.

"Of course," Chikaru nodded, paintbrush in one hand and a kendo *men* balanced on the other. "I think it's a wonderful project, and until you can get custom helmets designed, you'll have to make do with my paltry skills."

"Your so-called paltry skills are worlds better than mine," Hazuki snorted.

After making a few more dabs with the brush, Chikaru held the helmet out to her. "There. How's this one?"

Once again, Hazuki found herself in awe of her friend's artistic skills. Even though the grille-front of a kendo helmet was far from the perfect canvas, she had managed to paint each of them so far with an individually distinctive butterfly design, readily visible for what it was in spite of the gaps between the bars of the face mask. This one was an orange-and-black monarch butterfly, its wings reaching out from the center to encompass the entire face. "Beautiful," Hazuki nodded, taking it from Chikaru's hand and setting it to dry with the others. A dozen such *men* rested on the long tables of the Lulim club-room turned art studio, each one unique in color and pattern.

"Thank you," Chikaru smiled. "I can imagine they'll need a bit of touch-up work after a few spars."

"Either that or no one's going to want to take any head-shots because they might mess it up."

"And anyway, the painting is the least I can do; you're the one footing the bill for this. This sort of equipment is pretty expensive, isn't it?"

Hazuki shrugged as she unpacked another helmet. "My parents give me a ridiculously good allowance, and I've never had much cause to spend it. Apparently my former self was similarly frugal, so I had quite a savings built up."

"Let's see…" Chikaru said, consulting the lepidopterology book on her desk. "I know they're not native to Japan, but I think I have to go

with a purple emperor next. They're lovely."

"Ooh, I agree," Hazuki nodded, looking at the open page. "Maybe this one should be Tamao's: the color matches her eyes."

"My goodness," Chikaru giggled. "Picking out sparring equipment based on the color of her eyes. If this isn't true love, what is?"

Hazuki said nothing: merely gave Chikaru a roll of the eyes as she went to unpack more equipment.

"Aaaand are the two of you getting much quality time together now that you're getting ready to teach yet another club?" Chikaru went on.

"You see both of us every day," Hazuki reminded her. "Any time we end up in a pile on your bed is quality time, as far as I'm concerned."

"I meant quality time to yourselves, silly."

"Here and there," Hazuki said, hoping that she wasn't blushing as much as she thought she might be.

"You don't have to keep making so much time for me, you know," Chikaru said in a more serious tone.

"It's not about *making* time for you," Hazuki protested. "It's about… not being able to fathom the idea of spending time *without* you."

"I'm hardly egotistical enough to imagine the two of you are thinking of *me* when you're smooching."

"Are you sure about that?" Hazuki smirked. "She told me about the time she asked to kiss you, you know."

"Oh, my goodness, she did? And what did you say?"

"That I couldn't be angry at her for *that*," Hazuki shrugged, grinning evilly. "After all, the same thought's crossed *my* mind more than

once."

Chikaru gave a dramatic sigh as she dabbed her brush onto the next mask. "Now, now. You both know I'm a non-combatant in that level of affection. You should keep that strictly to yourselves… as long as you remember to tell me *just* enough to allow me to enjoy it vicariously."

"In all honesty, we're taking all of that very slowly," Hazuki admitted. "It's kind of nice to not feel rushed for a change."

"That's good."

"Plus, neither of us knows what the hell we're doing."

This earned another giggle from Chikaru, but then her smile faded slightly. "Have you talked to her any more about the elephant in the room?"

Hazuki shook her head slowly. "No. She hasn't really brought it up, and I haven't been pressing it. There's not much more I can tell her beyond what she knows without admitting I'm from one of those parallel dimensions you were talking about that day. That's a huge step."

"She'll need to know more of it at some point, even if it's not *that* ."

"I know."

"Otherwise it might raise some awkward questions when you both turn forty, and yet *you* still don't look a day over nineteen."

Hazuki had to laugh at this. "We had our first date less than three weeks ago, and you've already got us married for twenty-five years."

"What can I say?" Chikaru shrugged. "Two women, double the nesting instinct. Besides, you kissed on that first date, so obviously it's destiny."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," Hazuki said with a sarcastic scowl.

"As you like. But seriously, Hazuki, she *will* need to know more eventually."

"I know," Hazuki nodded. "But can you blame me for not wanting to talk about how I'm destined to outlive her by a factor of who knows how many lives? That is, if I don't get pulled away to track down the missing guardians of the universe first?"

Chikaru shook her head sadly. "No. I don't blame you at all."

"I don't suppose you have any more Shakespeare quotes to soften the blow?"

"Not as such," Chikaru admitted. "But I did have a… rather *uncomfortable* thought, and I wonder if you've had it too."

The last part of this sounded very reluctant, and Hazuki sat down opposite Chikaru at the desk, leaning in to study her friend's pensive expression. "Tell me."

"Have you ever wondered if there's a way to… *share* our *Souma* with her?"

"Yes," Hazuki replied, nodding slowly. "But I don't think we can. No matter how many times we touch, mine always just bounces off of her. I can't *imagine* trying to… I don't know, *force* it into her?"

"I feel the same," Chikaru agreed. "And in all honesty, it's probably better if we can't. It might seem like a way to solve *some* problems, but… it's too much like playing God. No, scratch that, it *is* playing God. I really don't like the thought of what I'd be tempted to do if I could bestow immortality on other people."

"I agree. But yeah, the thought *did* cross my mind."

"Well, I think your standing on the kendo team is adequate demonstration that you're not the type to abuse your power for personal gain," Chikaru pointed out.

Hazuki nodded again, but found herself wondering all the same. It was one thing to back away from a sport in which she had an unfair advantage, but how would she react to having the power to extend the life of someone she loved? Would she have the strength to *not* use it?

Rather than think about it further, she instead tried to borrow Chikaru's humor-stick to poke the tension. "And a *little* personal gain might be fun. I bet with a little training, you and I could take Olympic gold in Beach Volleyball."

Tamao looked up from "their" table as Hazuki emerged from inside the ice cream shop, cones in hand. "So what's today's selection?" she asked with a grin. "Secrets of the universe? Mysteries of life?"

"Butterscotch," Hazuki replied around a mouthful taken from her already-melting treat. "Which I believe is sadly mundane, but tasty. Your double-chocolate, my lady." She passed the second cone to Tamao with a flourish.

"Mmm, I'll take tasty over mysterious any day."

For a while both concentrated on getting their cones into a manageable state, as the heat of the Sunday afternoon was doing quite a bit of damage to the frosty confection. "Refreshing," Tamao sighed, contentedly.

"I'll settle for just cold," Hazuki shrugged. "This was a good idea, Tamao-chan."

"Chocolate ice cream is *always* a good idea. Even in the dead of winter."

"I'll remind you of that come January."

Tamao giggled. "I'll look forward to that, then. So, are you nervous?"

Hazuki looked at her askance. "About January? Hardly."

"Silly. I meant this next week. The *Kachou Kamen* club."

"What's there to be nervous about?" Hazuki mumbled around her butterscotch. "Teaching a fringe martial art to a group of schoolgirls of varying degrees of athleticism? Easy."

"I'm sure it'll be fine. If you can teach Nagisa-chan and me to do a seventy-four stage t'ai-chi-style workout, and teach judo throws to Chiyo-chan, then as far as I'm concerned you can teach anybody anything."

"Thank you for your faith. We'll see how it goes."

Tamao smiled at Hazuki's continued self-effacement. "I'm very proud of you, Hazuki-chan," she said quietly, her heart suddenly feeling very full.

Perhaps recognizing the change in tone, Hazuki looked up at Tamao with a curious smile. "I haven't done it yet, though."

"I don't care. I'm still proud of you. After everything you've been through… after you lost your sister, and after… this world nearly lost you," she paused to swallow past the lump in her throat before she continued. "Even after the nonsense with Kenjyo-sama and all the rumors, you've gone and made a name for yourself. Your last Saturday workout had fifty girls attending, Spica's winning all its kendo invitationals, people are constantly raving about your self-defense lessons… Astraea is really starting to love Azuma Hazuki."

"You think so?" Hazuki blushed, an uncharacteristically shy smile alighting on her face.

"Very much," Tamao whispered. "I know I am."

Hazuki took Tamao's free hand and squeezed it fondly. "It's more than mutual, Suzumi-san."

"This world's a better place with you in it, Hazuki-chan."

"Thank you," Hazuki said softly, then rolled her eyes with amusement. "As for my sister, if I ever *do* see her again, I'll have to thank her for sending me here. I don't think she planned on things happening quite the way they have, but it's worked out wonderfully."

Tamao smiled, but it quickly faded. This was going to be difficult, she knew, but it had to be said. "Hazuki-chan, about… Hatsumi and Naoko-sama…"

"You don't believe what we told you," Hazuki said, as a statement rather than a question.

Tamao looked up into the other girl's eyes, but saw no accusation or even disappointment there. "I *want* to believe it, I really do," she sighed. "And I believe that *you* believe it, for whatever that's worth. I just can't help wondering if there's not a more…" she pointed to the dwindling butterscotch. "… *mundane* explanation for what's happened."

"Such as Hatsumi and Naoko being twin sisters who lived with my family and Chikaru's, then brought us together under the deception that they were the same person?"

Tamao blinked slowly. "Um, yes, that's almost *exactly* what I was thinking."

"I thought you might," Hazuki smiled mischievously. "For being a poet, you're one of the single most *rational* human beings I've ever known. It's a cute contradiction, make no mistake. But the fact remains that everything we told you was true. No twin sisters. No mistaken identity. Definite otherworldly component to the story. And I understand *completely* why you can't wrap your mind around that. It's *okay*, Tamao-chan."

"I don't know why it's so hard for me. I mean, I believe in angels, but… it seems impossible to think that I actually *knew* one."

"It'll all make sense eventually," Hazuki assured her, then gave a lopsided smile. "Or it won't. What's important is that she was right: our Tamao-chan never has to be lonely again…"

Tuesday afternoon came all too quickly, and Hazuki felt almost light-headed as she looked out over the assembled group in the gymnasium. The name of the club was turning out to be all too appropriate: she certainly felt like she had a few butterflies of her own as she prepared to address the twenty or so women watching her every move.

"Good afternoon, ladies. Welcome to *Kachou Kamen* . For those of you who've already had kendo practice today, you're either very brave or very masochistic, but we'll sort out which it is shortly."

There was a brief murmur of laughter, and then Hazuki continued. "For those of you who don't know, the weapon you're holding right now is a naginata -- a practice version, of course -- and as odd as it may sound, it's very much a lady's weapon." She twirled her own with both hands and brought it into a ready position, both hands gripping the wooden shaft as she pointed the bamboo blade at her future students. "Hundreds of years ago, when the samurai were with their lords or out to war, it was their wives who were left to defend the homes, and traditionally, this is the weapon with which they did so. Something with reach, heft and clout. Something that could unhorse a rider, and run an attacker through before he could ever get close enough to use his sword. You underestimated the wife of a samurai at your peril, because they fought just as hard as their husbands, if not more so."

She scanned the crowd for familiar faces, smiling to herself as she saw Chikaru, Tamao and even Nagisa in the front row. "If you hold a naginata, you have something to defend. I want each of you to think

about what it is that you hold dear in your lives, and keep those things in your heart. *That* is what you're fighting for."

After giving them a moment to ponder this, she smiled. "Any questions so far?"

A Lulim senior whom Hazuki did not recognize by name raised her hand, and at Hazuki's acknowledging nod, gave a hesitant smile. "I was just wondering… why butterflies?"

"Glad you asked," Hazuki nodded. "The style you will be learning, *Kachou Kamen*, is named in honor of the traveling master who originated it. It is also in her honor that the incredibly talented Chikaru-sama has painted your face-masks with butterflies, as the butterfly mask was both her symbol and her 'stage name,' you could say. We fight masked, as she did."

There were no further questions, so Hazuki continued to pace the front of the group, resting her naginata on her shoulder. There were a few unfamiliar faces in the crowd to go with the girl who'd spoken, but she was pretty sure she'd seen each of them at either the Self-Defense Club or her Saturday workouts. Best to learn their names quickly.

At the same time, there were plenty of friends, not the least of which being Kizuna, Remon and Kagome. The former two simply beamed at her, as they had been doing nonstop for a few weeks now. "There has been something of a resurgence in naginata use over the past few decades, and there is a generally accepted 'New Naginata' style to go with that, so we'll be learning about that style as well."

She allowed her eyes to rest briefly on the one true surprise amongst them. Part of Hazuki had wondered whether or not Kaname might show up, but she would never have guessed that she would instead find Momomi standing there in fighting gear. Too many possibilities there: was she spying, doing something to make Kaname jealous, or just expressing legitimate interest? None of it was worth considering

just yet, though: Hazuki had requested that the club be open to all three schools, and so it was.

"It's going to be a while before we get into actual sparring," Hazuki went on, pacing back the other way. "There's a great deal to learn first about respecting your weapon and respecting your peers. Those of you on the kendo team already know this, but this is as much about discipline and restraint as it is beating someone in a fight. You'll need to learn and demonstrate control before we can set you loose on one another. But once we do, make no mistake, this is a contact sport. There will be bruises. But take care of your gear, and it'll take care of you. Respect your sparring partners and your opponents, and expect the same in return."

Another hand went up amidst the five attendees from the kendo team. "Nanto-san," Hazuki nodded.

Yaya exchanged a quick grin with Tsubomi, who was standing next to her. "Does Kojima-sensei know about this club?" she asked, waggling her eyebrows. "Or is this a competition?"

Hazuki smiled brightly, then craned her neck to look at someone in the back row. "Would you like to answer this one, Sensei?"

"She knows about it," came a familiar gruff voice, making Yaya's eyes go wide with shock. Several of the students turned to see the one who'd spoken take off her helmet, revealing the face of the kendo instructor. "And no, Nanto-kun, this is not a competition. If your performance with my team tails off, Azuma-san will drop you from this club before you know what hit you."

"Kojima-sensei and I discussed the idea of this club at great length before Chikaru-sama started the paperwork," Hazuki explained. "As a matter of fact, it's thanks to her that we'll be able to eventually do full-contact with practice weapons, as that requires the presence of an instructor. Also… should I tell them this part now, Sensei?"

"Might as well," Kojima nodded.

"Even though this is technically a St. Lulim's School club and not a legitimate athletic organization, if we show promise, Kojima-sensei has agreed to bring us before the administration of the three Astraea schools and sponsor our entry into competitions and tournaments. If we work hard, we can be more than a club. We can be a *team*, bringing honor not to Lulim, not to Spica, and not to Miator, but to all three of the academies that we call home."

With that, she planted the blunt end of her naginata against the padded floor and turned to address them all. "So, butterflies, what do you say? Are you ready?"

" *Hai!"* came a chorus of voices in response.

"Glad to hear it," Hazuki nodded, trying to keep her smile from completely taking over her face. "Then spread out, give yourselves plenty of room, and let's get to work!"

Next: Convergence

Convergence

I'm looking for a sacred hand to carve into this stone

A ghost of comfort, angel's breath, to keep this life inside my chest

This world falls on me with hopes of immortality

Everywhere I turn, all the beauty just keeps shaking me

-Indigo Girls

Part 16: Convergence

The remainder of the semester was quite possibly both the busiest and the happiest two months of Hazuki's life to date. Between the push toward exams, her ongoing role with the kendo team, instructing not only *Kachou Kamen* but the Self-Defense Club and her normal Saturday workouts, working one-on-one with Kojima-sensei, spending time with Chikaru, spending time with Tamao, and spending time with Chikaru *and* Tamao, she was quite thankful that she no longer required more than two hours of sleep per night.

During that time, the naginata team had come along quite well: Hazuki had successfully tested for the rank of first- *dan* master in naginatajutsu prior to the first meeting, and with the help of Kojima-sensei was able to apply for and bestow true student ranks on each of the members, giving them an ongoing series of goals for official advancement. This would also help them when it came time to compete, as they would be able to cross blades with those closer to their own skill levels in tournament play. While some were better at it than others, as could be expected, they had all managed to keep their chins up and their frustrations down. In all likelihood, they would

be able to field a very competitive group after returning from summer vacation.

The meditation sessions with Chikaru were also progressing nicely, as were their continued one-on-one spars. While neither of them could yet approach the level of the other in their respective disciplines, Chikaru was showing great improvement with both sword and naginata, and Hazuki was slowly getting better at manipulating the energy within herself, even outside of their meditative trances.

While her relationship with Tamao was still moving slowly in terms of intimacy, their time together had been a happy blur of held hands, warm cuddles, meaningful looks, soft kisses, and of course ice cream. And truly, that seemed to be more than enough for a pair of nervous virgins making this up as they went along. The dreaded Next Step Talks had been few and short: they seemed to be mutually agreed on the idea of enjoying every moment together without blundering forward any more quickly than came naturally.

As enjoyable as this was, though, the best times were still those spent together as three. By now the threesome rumors were all over the dormitory (even though Kizuna and Remon swore blind that they had told nobody), but rather than be embarrassed by them, Chikaru in particular seemed to enjoy them hugely. Even Shizuma, who knew better, once joked during a visit that things could have gone much more easily last year had she known that Tamao was open to the idea of a three-way. (This had earned her a blush and a pout from Nagisa, quickly remedied with a "just teasing" and a kiss.)

The extra time afforded by the lessened need for sleep allowed Hazuki the study time necessary to ace her exams for the first time in either of her incarnations. Since she could no longer count on athletics to facilitate her continued education, the need to focus herself on academics was greater than ever. She was more than surprised at the results, and the pride expressed by her two dear ones made it all the more worthwhile.

Then, with a seeming suddenness after the frenzy of activity surrounding exams, Hazuki found herself taking part in the dormitory tradition of Summer School. Both Tamao and Chikaru had told her wonderful things about this post-exam ritual, but nothing could quite prepare her for the reality of it as she found herself on a bus, packed for a two-day beach trip.

"So let me get this straight," Hazuki said, placing her bag on one of the beds in the room she was to share with Chikaru. "The school has its own beach resort?"

"You'd be surprised how much of this land is owned by the same group," Chikaru nodded as she opened the shutters of their window, revealing a spectacular view of the ocean. "Mostly they rent it out for business retreats throughout the year, but this weekend is set aside every summer for the resident students. This stretch of the beach is completely private."

"Incredible. Wretched excess at its finest."

"Being a student here has its moments, certainly," Chikaru winked. She began busily unfastening her tie, then took off her uniform sweater and began unbuttoning her shirt.

"Um, what are you doing?" Hazuki asked with a bemused smile as Chikaru tossed shirt, skirt and suspenders into a pile on the bed.

"Getting my swimsuit on, of course," she grinned, reaching around to unhook her bra. "The beach is waiting!"

Hazuki looked away blushing (but smiling), and began to unpack her things, trying not to pay too much attention to the sounds of rustling fabric behind her. Chikaru was as fearlessly trusting as ever, and Hazuki felt the now familiar rush of pleasure mixed with contentedness at her antics.

"Before I forget," Chikaru said then, "I have something for you."

"There's a beautiful naked woman standing behind me saying she has something for me," Hazuki sighed dramatically. "What am I going to tell Tamao?"

"Oh, she won't mind. I already gave it to her."

The blush deepened. "As much as I'm enjoying the innuendo *and* the mental image, what is it?"

A small paper package landed on the mattress beside Hazuki's bag. "Open it," Chikaru bade her, and Hazuki could hear the smile in her voice.

Inside the package was a very brief string bikini. Hazuki unfolded the distressingly small amount of fabric to see that it was mostly in blue, decorated on one "cup" with a purple butterfly. "Did you make this?" she asked, wonderingly.

"I made one for each of the girls in *Kachou Kamen*," Chikaru replied. "And you can look now."

Hazuki turned around to see that Chikaru had indeed gotten changed into a similar swimsuit, though hers was red with a black butterfly. "Do you like?" she asked, striking a pose.

"Um, yes, very much," Hazuki managed. "And the swimsuit's nice, too."

"Oh dear, I broke Hazuki-chan again," Chikaru mock-pouted.

"You really *are* fearless. You're going to go out onto a beach filled with hormonal teenage girls, the majority of whom are probably *at least* bi-curious, wearing *that?* "

"Not quite, Hazuki-chan," Chikaru grinned evilly as she slipped on a pair of sunglasses. " *We* are going out onto the beach wearing *that* ."

As the day wore on, there were indeed many butterflies on the golden sands of the private beach. However, while Hazuki certainly appreciated the seeming team solidarity, she couldn't help feeling incredibly exposed. She spent much of the early part of the day under an umbrella with a similarly attired Tamao and Nagisa before Chikaru could coax her out to play some two-on-two volleyball.

"Everyone's looking at me," Hazuki grumbled as they stood waiting at the net for their next opponents.

"That's because you're gorgeous," Chikaru grinned cheekily, pulling down her sunglasses to give her a wink.

"My bandages are covering more of me than the suit."

"So they are."

"I've never even *worn* a bikini before. Not to sound ungrateful, but couldn't you have made me a one-piece like you did for Kagome?"

"Kagome is thirteen, incredibly shy, and doesn't have your abs."

"You know, with the way you've dressed us up, Tamao is beginning to doubt your claim about not being attracted to women."

"Feh. I may not shop, but I can still enjoy the window displays."

After a few games (and several chances to be grateful for how well constructed these swimsuits actually were), the two spent the rest of the day with Tamao, swimming in the warm ocean waters, strolling along the beach hand in hand in hand, lazily sunning themselves, and enduring catcalls from some of their less reserved friends.

After dark, to Hazuki's partial surprise, most of the members of *Kachou Kamen* wound up spending the evening crammed into the suite she and Chikaru were sharing, drinking tea and chatting happily amongst one another about the end of the semester's trials

and tribulations, the fun they'd had on the beach that day, their plans for break, and their excitement over the possibility of getting to compete once they returned. As always, Chikaru held court masterfully: she was far more comfortable in these situations than Hazuki thought she herself would ever be.

Eventually, Hazuki slipped out alone to return to the darkened beach, seeking some peace and quiet. There would be enough of that soon, she knew, since she would be staying in the dormitory for the first week of vacation while most everyone else scattered, but after spending the day very much in the public eye, it was nice to get away and have a few moments to herself.

She was wearing an unbuttoned shirt and board shorts over her swimsuit, but she hardly needed even this: the evening was pleasantly warm, even after sunset. After watching the waves for a few minutes, she stretched hugely, then settled into the first stance of her typical weaponless workout. There hadn't been time for this earlier, and it felt wonderful to close the activity of the day with this very settling, very familiar routine of alternating motion and stillness. Before long, she felt a sense of returning tranquility, and allowed herself a soft smile as she continued into the next stance.

All at once, however, the breeze picked up, becoming a hot, dry wind that seemed to blow right through her, momentarily taking her breath away. Her eyes snapped open, and she looked around quizzically, as though seeking the source of the sudden gust. Her unbound hair whipped around her as she breathed deeply of this strange wind, and she felt the *Souma* inside her flare brightly, as though the flames were being fanned from outside.

"Something's coming," she whispered aloud.

As the wind picked up intensity yet again, she felt strangely detached, almost as though her soul were being blown from her body, and then, barely audible over the sound of the rushing air, she thought she could hear a familiar voice.

" *Hazuki-chan…"*

"Who's there?" she whispered, looking out across the water.

Then, as quickly as it had come, the wind faded, and she heard her name called again. "Hazuki-chan?"

She turned to see Tamao standing a short distance behind her, the soft smile on her face visible even in the near-darkness. "Tamao-chan?" she called in return, then cleared her suddenly parched throat. "Did you just call for me?"

"Yes," Tamao nodded, suddenly shy. "I was watching you for a while, and… when the wind started blowing your hair like that, and you were outlined in the starlight, I was just…" She paused, then looked away. "You're beautiful, Hazuki-chan. No wonder Yaya-chan keeps calling you a goddess."

"She only loves me for my sword," Hazuki chuckled.

"I sense a happy poem in my future. All about grace and beauty and starlight."

"I'd love to hear it when it's ready," Hazuki nodded, brushing her hair back out of her face and trying to clear her head. Reality seemed to be firmly back in place, but that had been *very* strange.

"Hazuki-chan, are you okay?" Tamao asked, stepping closer.

Hazuki nodded, trying to force a reassuring smile. "Yeah. Today was just kind of a new experience."

"I understand. I'm not sure there's any way to fully prepare someone for Summer School at Astraea."

"Is there anything else I should know before tomorrow?"

"As a matter of fact, there's a little… ritual we do every year," Tamao said, looking off toward some thick trees up on the bluffs above the

beach. "There's a chapel in the middle of that little forest, and every year, on the second night, we carry a candle through the darkness and pray there, two by two. It's said that things happen in the woods to change the bonds of friendship forever, and any wishes made will come true."

"Things happen," Hazuki repeated, looking skeptical. "It doesn't seem like a very private place for *things* to happen."

"Not *those* kinds of things," Tamao blushed, rolling her eyes, but then she looked suddenly thoughtful. "At least, I don't *think* so. No, just pitch darkness and only a candle to guide you. Something to bring you closer to your chosen partner."

Hazuki nodded slowly, wondering if she were being asked on some sort of bizarre date. "Is it always two by two? No groups? You know, safety in numbers?"

"I've only ever seen as many as three. And… I'd like to go with you and Chikaru, if that's okay."

"If that's okay?" Hazuki said, a bit surprised at this wording. Had Tamao assumed that Hazuki and Chikaru were going to make plans without her, even after all this time together? "Why wouldn't it be? Why would I go with her and not you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I just… suspected you would have, since I was originally going to go with Nagisa-chan, but… she told me she'd rather see the three of us all together, because…"

When Tamao trailed off, Hazuki prompted her to continue. "Because what, Tamao-chan?"

"Because I'm still confused," she sighed. "Even now, I'm not sure what's happening between the three of us, and…"

"… And a little ritual time in the woods might help us sort it out?" Hazuki smiled, only partially in jest.

"It's silly, I know, but…"

"No, it's not," Hazuki laughed. "I think it's a fine idea, and I'll be honored to walk with both of you."

Tamao nodded slowly, absently chewed her lower lip for a moment, then looked up at her again. "I love you, Hazuki-chan. I only wish that I wasn't so confused about everything."

"I love you too, Tamao-chan. And you're not the only one to be confused, believe me."

They leaned in slowly to kiss, but as their lips met, there was an almost audible spark, and Tamao reeled back while Hazuki's vision briefly went green.

"Ow," said Tamao, rubbing her bottom lip. "This dry wind must have gotten us all full of static."

"Probably," Hazuki smiled weakly, wondering what in the world was going on with her *Souma* . It had bounced off Tamao as they touched, like always, but this was the most forcibly it had ever done so. "Um, maybe we should try again after we… discharge a little?"

"We should go back inside anyway," Tamao nodded, holding out one hand. "Technically, I don't think we're supposed to be out after dark."

Hazuki tried to take Tamao's hand, but again, there was a sharp spark as they touched. "I'm sorry," Hazuki winced as Tamao snatched back her hand.

"Poor thing, your hair's getting all poofy, too," Tamao grimaced. "Let's get out of this wind."

Hazuki nodded, then slipped off her shirt, wrapped her hand with it and offered it to Tamao again. This time there were no sparks, and they made their way back to the resort more or less hand in hand.

The next day went pretty much the same as the first, with more beach, more volleyball, more sunning and swimming, and more pleasant company. The only substantial difference for Hazuki came when she was asked by a dozen or so of the girls to lead them through her standard workout. They wound up doing their stances out in the shallowest part of the water, the waves lapping at their feet as they progressed from movement to movement.

When evening came, everyone reconvened after dinner around a beach bonfire in order to prepare for the journey to the woodland chapel. They drew lots to determine the order in which they would make their separate journeys, with each spaced a few minutes apart to allow for true isolation as they walked. Chikaru, drawing for the three of them, wound up picking the highest number, so they would be going last. Hazuki didn't mind at all, though, because this gave them plenty of time to watch the others pair up and prepare themselves.

Among those she had come to know well over her first semester at St. Spica, Hazuki noted with some surprise that Nagisa and Yaya had paired up, as had Tsubomi and Chiyo. She would have expected those four to pair along school lines, but perhaps Tsubomi was taking this chance to bond with the meek Miatoran that she often worked with in Self-Defense. Plus, she probably felt she could trust Nagisa due to her involvement with Shizuma.

Coming as *no* surprise, however, was their fellow triad in the form of Kizuna, Remon and Kagome. Before they made their own trek up toward the woods, Kizuna took a moment to hug all three members of the elder "threesome," calling them an inspiration and a vision to strive for (until she noticed the way Kagome was staring at her and stopped).

At last, with the beach empty and most of the groups already having been there and back to the resort, their turn came. Tamao walked between them as Chikaru held the candle, and before long, they entered the woods. The thick canopy of branches quickly closed

over their heads, leaving them walking in a tiny bubble of candlelight, hands held tightly.

About a hundred yards in, they heard voices from just ahead.

"Aah! What was that?"

"I didn't hear anything," came the familiar quaver of Nagisa's voice.

"Stay close to me, Nagisa-chan."

"Um, Yaya-chan is touching my butt."

"Oh. Sorry."

The voices receded down a different path, and only when they were gone did Tamao allow herself to giggle. "Naughty Yaya-chan."

"Things to change the bonds of friendship forever, eh?" Hazuki chortled.

They walked on, and Tamao's face took on a thoughtful look. "Not always good things, though. This is where I really hit bottom with Nagisa-chan. This is where things truly started to go from flirtatious and pleasant to desperate and scary."

"The recording?" Hazuki asked, not wanting to specify further, as she was not certain how much Chikaru knew of this story.

"Yes," Tamao nodded simply.

"You've come far since then, Tamao-chan," Chikaru assured her. "It's been a pleasure watching your heart open up this year, like a flower after the rain."

"Thank you, Chikaru-sama," Tamao whispered, but her next words were lost to the increasing rustling sounds of the branches as the breeze once again picked up. Just like last night, it was a hot, dry

wind that blew right through the trees and seemingly right through the three of them.

It also served to blow out their candle, plunging them into near-complete darkness.

"Well, that's certainly inconvenient," Chikaru sighed. "I don't suppose either of you brought a lighter?"

"We'll be fine," Hazuki said, squeezing Tamao's hand with a confidence she herself did not feel. "Just let your eyes adjust, and we'll keep going."

They continued on, stepping very slowly. Hazuki once again found herself unsettled by this wind: it seemed to be blowing on more than a physical level: for lack of a better term, it was almost spiritual in nature, and it was certainly having an effect on her *Souma* .

After a few more steps, Hazuki stopped as she felt Tamao's hand slip out of hers. She looked back to see that the other girl had stopped in her tracks, and even over the sound of the wind she heard Tamao gasp.

"Tamao-chan, what is it?" she asked.

"Your… your hair," Tamao whispered.

Hazuki turned so that her back was to the wind, and as her hair blew out in front of her, she felt her own breath catch in her throat as she saw what Tamao meant. Her hair was filled with hundreds of tiny green sparks, each of them carried away on the wind for a few feet before winking out. She looked over at Chikaru to see that she, too, was alive with the tiny lights as they danced through her ruffling hair.

"That's not… static this time… is it?" Tamao said in a tiny voice.

Hazuki held up one hand against the breeze, and her skin began to glimmer with more tiny motes of light, which again trailed off from her

fingertips and into the darkness. Chikaru set down the candle-holder, then held up a similarly glowing hand to join hers, and as they touched, the light intensified, washing all three of them in a soft green glow.

"Green…" Tamao whispered, her eyes wide, her jaw slack.

"What's going on?" Hazuki said quietly.

"I was hoping you could tell me," Chikaru replied. "This is new to me, too."

Hazuki looked at Tamao, hoping to find some words to explain this, but instead found herself mesmerised by the sight of hundreds of their tiny sparks swirling around her. She remembered the young poet's words from the evening before, *outlined in the starlight*, and wondered if this was anything like what she had seen.

"It's okay, Tamao-chan," Chikaru said softly, her voice immediately taking on its best reassuring tone. "You're safe with us. We won't let anything happen to you."

Tamao shook her head, as though trying to clear her vision. "Are you… are you angels, too?"

"No, Tamao-chan, we're just people," Hazuki assured her. "We're just like you."

Again, Tamao shook her head, but this time it looked more like denial. "You're not," she whispered. "You're… this is… everything you told me is true, isn't it?"

"All that and more," Chikaru nodded. "I was hoping for a better way to tell you the whole story, but…"

"The story doesn't matter right now," Hazuki interrupted. "What matters is that we're still *us*, Tamao-chan. I love you, and I… I trust you with what's inside me."

"But what… what *is* inside you?"

"It's just energy. Just like we talked about months ago. Energy that we've been learning to control."

When Tamao did not reply, Chikaru reached out her free hand. "Tamao-chan, may we have your hands? Maybe we can show you."

Tamao looked from one extended hand to the other, not moving a muscle.

"Please, Tamao-chan," Hazuki whispered. "You know we'd never do anything to hurt you."

Slowly, reluctantly, Tamao reached out and clasped their hands in hers. As she did, she let out a gasp as trails of sparks rushed over her, covering her from head to foot. For a moment, she looked terrified, but then her face slowly softened into an expression of awe. Hazuki, too, looked on with amazement: it was like the sparks of their meditation outlining her shell, but this time it was very visible, and very real.

"This energy is part of what I am," Chikaru said slowly, "and part of what Hazuki-chan is as well. It was given to us by Naoko when she left us: a gift from our shared angel, so that we could maybe bring a pale reflection of her light to the world once she was gone. It's something we can't…" she paused to collect herself before she went on. "We can't give it to you, Tamao-chan, and even if we could, it wouldn't be our right to do so, but we've been trying to think of another way to share it with you."

"Do you trust us, Tamao-chan?" Hazuki whispered.

Tamao nodded dazedly. "I do."

Hazuki met Chikaru's eyes, and they nodded to one another. They had, in fact, discussed what they were about to do at great length,

but as much as they'd talked about it, Hazuki found it hard to believe that it was about to happen right here and now.

Dropping into the lightest of meditative focus, Hazuki felt for her *Souma*, and found its source blazing away inside her, perhaps brighter than she had ever felt it. With some effort, she split it into two bright suns, just as Chikaru had shown her, and sent them slowly moving through herself, one toward each hand. Across the distance between them, through the hands they still had clasped, she felt Chikaru doing the same. Soon, they were each holding their *Souma* just inside the palms of their hands: each with one meeting the other, and each with one on the impenetrable border between themselves and Tamao.

Then, through that small star just outside of Tamao's reach, Hazuki did her best to project feelings of love and contentedness, of the joy that Tamao's presence had brought into her life, of every cozy moment and Sunday ice cream, every flash of pride in shared training and every stirring of her soul when they kissed. She shone those memories, and those emotions, as brightly as she could, hoping to warm her dear Tamao with her fires.

"This is who we are," Chikaru said in a soft, steady voice. "Not angels. Not gods. Just two women who love you very much, Tamao-chan."

With those words, Hazuki and Chikaru joined the fires held in their clasped hands, and as before, they grew into a blaze of such intensity that their shared *Souma* rushed through them both, causing the hands holding Tamao's to almost explode with energy. Soon it was not merely sparks but a steady emerald glow that washed over their wide-eyed companion, and for a few seconds, Tamao's face took on an expression of amazement and joy, smiling even as her breath came in shudders and her eyes filled with tears.

But all too soon, the smile faded, the eyes widened even more, and Tamao began to shake her head rapidly, fear quickly taking the place of happiness. She snatched her hands away, breaking the link

between them, and once again they found themselves in pitch darkness, without a single spark of *Souma* to be seen.

"I'm sorry," Tamao whispered tremulously. "I'm sorry, I can't… I can't…" Her voice was lost in a single sob, and she turned and fled into the darkness.

"Tamao!" Hazuki called, starting after her.

"We should probably let her go," Chikaru said quietly.

"Alone in a dark forest? Like hell we should."

"Right," Chikaru nodded. Still keeping their hands clasped, they followed the sounds of Tamao's running footsteps. Before long, they emerged from the edge of the wood to see Tamao already on her way back to the resort building, and only then, convinced that she was safe for now, did Hazuki stop pursuing.

"I'm sorry, Hazuki-chan," Chikaru whispered. "This is my fault. It was too sudden."

"How else were we going to explain it?" Hazuki sighed.

"I don't know, but… she's probably going to need some time. You saw that smile as well as I did: it probably just got too intense too quickly after that. Hopefully she'll remember the message when the shock wears off a bit."

"Maybe," Hazuki said darkly, as she slowly started back toward the resort. "Or maybe yours has been the right way all along."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe… we just don't get to love like normal people do after all."

After stumbling blindly to their room, Tamao spent a good ten minutes doing nothing more than crying into Nagisa's lap as her

distressed roommate tried her best to soothe her with soft words and gentle pats. "It's okay, Tamao-chan," Nagisa repeated over and over, stroking Tamao's dark hair. "Everything's okay now. I'll take care of you."

"Thank you, Nagisa-chan," Tamao finally managed as her sobs settled. She wiped her face with the handkerchief Nagisa offered her, and tried desperately to slow her hammering heart.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Nagisa asked gently.

Tamao let out a shuddering breath as she tried to piece the images together. "I was with Hazuki-chan and Chikaru-sama, in the woods. Our candle went out, and…"

"You were scared," Nagisa nodded. "I understand. Those woods are creepy."

"It wasn't that. I felt safe with them, but then… something happened, and… oh, Nagisa-chan, I was…"

"Did someone hurt you, Tamao-chan?" Nagisa whispered, her eyes widening. "Oh, God, did *they* hurt you? What did they do?"

"No, no, it's not like that," Tamao quavered. "They did something, and… I saw how close they really are."

"What, did they kiss? I thought they weren't like that!"

Tamao sighed, realizing that she was explaining it badly, but at this point she was amazed that she could say anything at all. "No, it's nothing like that. It's just that I finally realized… who they are, and what they are to each other, and… as much as they've tried to make me part of their lives, I don't think I can *ever*…" She closed her eyes against the memory of those sparks gently caressing her, the glow washing over her and warming her like liquid sunlight. She'd felt so much warmth and so much happiness, and she desperately wanted to let it in and share it with them, but she could not. As much as she

wanted to be part of this incredible, shining green that she now realized she'd been seeing all along, she all too quickly felt that it was simply beyond her, and this realization had been more than she could bear.

And yet now more than ever, she knew that she was in love. With both of them.

But did she simply not love them enough? Was she not good enough to be loved by these angels?

"I think it might be too much," she said at last. "I don't know if I'm strong enough."

"Tamao-chan, listen to me," Nagisa said intently. Surprised by the tone in her friend's voice, Tamao sat up from her lap and faced her.

"I don't know what you saw," Nagisa went on, putting her hands on Tamao's shoulders and looking her in the eyes, "but I can tell you what I've seen every day for the past three months. I'm not some kind of love sage that knows all the answers or anything, but even I've noticed the way Hazuki looks at you, and even I've noticed the way Chikaru smiles when she holds your hand. It hurts so much to see my Tamao-chan thinking that she's not strong enough, because you're stronger than anyone I've ever known. You were strong enough to…"

Nagisa did not finish the thought, but Tamao could read it in her expression. *You were strong enough to push me into Shizuma's arms, even as much as you loved me, because you wanted me to be happy* .

"You deserve to be loved, Tamao-chan," Nagisa went on.

Tamao nodded slowly, then sighed. "I'm scared, Nagisa-chan. I don't know if I can face them again."

"Do you need me to stay?" Nagisa asked suddenly. "I can stay with you in the dorm until your parents come to fetch you next week."

"Don't be silly, Nagisa-chan. You've got your trip with Shizuma coming up."

"We can delay," Nagisa insisted. "If Tamao-chan needs me, we can delay. Or you could come with us!"

At this, Tamao could actually smile. "You're spending three weeks in France with your fiancee. You *hardly* need *me* there."

"But I can't leave you like this, and I'm sure Shizuma would agree. You've always taken such good care of me, Tamao-chan. Let me stay and take care of you."

Tamao leaned forward and put her arms around Nagisa, holding the babbling girl closely. "You really would, wouldn't you?" she whispered, amazed at the simple truth of it. After everything they'd been through, Nagisa would really do this for her.

"Of course I would. Anything for my Tamao-chan."

"Thank you, Nagisa-chan," Tamao sighed happily, closing her eyes against fresh tears. "That means more to me than I can say. But you *will* be on that plane with Shizuma in two days."

"Tamao-chan…"

"I mean it," Tamao insisted, sitting back and looking into her friend's confused eyes. "You've helped a lot just by saying that. Thank you. I'll try to be strong… just like you."

Nagisa looked more baffled than ever at this, so Tamao simply hugged her again, hoping that she'd be able to make good on this, but fearing that it would be impossible in the end.

When Hazuki and Chikaru returned wearily to their room, the first thing Hazuki noticed was that a note had been slipped under the door. She picked it up, but before she could open it, Chikaru's next words brought her short.

"So what's happening to our *Souma* ?"

"I don't know," Hazuki said, shaking her head. "This was the second time, though. Last night I was out on the beach, and I had the same reaction when that wind came up. Just not as… sparkly."

"Do you think we're being called?" Chikaru asked, cutting right to the heart of things as usual.

"Maybe," Hazuki considered. "Then again, knowing Aaya, I'd expect him to just pop out from behind a tree and say 'Hi, time to go now!' This is a little too subtle for him."

Chikaru nodded. "Well, I still have your knife and the comb. I wasn't able to carry them with me on the beach, obviously, but I'll keep them close by in case we need to leave in a hurry."

"Thanks," Hazuki acknowledged, then remembered the note in her hand. She unfolded it and inspected the unfamiliar handwriting.

"What's that?"

"Someone stuck this under the door. And I think I know who."

"Why? What does it say?"

Hazuki read it aloud. "Tuesday morning, seven a.m., the Spica equestrian range. We fight with bokken, not shinai. Come alone."

Chikaru arched her eyebrows. "Kaname's finally making good on that spar you asked for?"

"Looks that way."

"Tuesday's the day after tomorrow. Almost everyone will have left the school by then. I guess she doesn't want an audience this time?"

"Looks that way," Hazuki said again, crumpling the note with both hands. "I wonder if she has *any* idea how bad a time this was to pick a fight with me?"

Next: Asunder

Asunder

I thought I heard the angel's bells

But they were just the hounds of Hell

-Indigo Girls

.

It's a far cry from the world we thought we'd inherit

You can almost see the circle growing

You can almost feel the planets glowing

One day I feel I'm on top of the world, and the next it's falling in on me

One day I feel I'm ahead of the wheel, and the next it's rolling over me

One day I fly through a crack in the sky, and the next it's falling in on me

-Rush

Part 17: Asunder

Quite suddenly, the diminished need for sleep had become nothing more than a nuisance.

The wee hours of Tuesday morning found Hazuki lying awake in bed, staring fixedly at the ceiling and trying very hard not to think about anything. She didn't want to think about Tamao, who was

understandably avoiding her, because then she'd remember the heartbreaking moment when that amazed smile had darkened into terror, and Hazuki's fleeting hope of finally being able to tell her the truth had been dashed to pieces. She didn't want to think about Chikaru, who was busily blaming herself for everything, because that would only serve to remind Hazuki of whose fault this *really* was.

There wasn't even anything to study now that vacation had officially started.

A glance at the clock revealed that she had made it all the way to three a.m. Still four hours until Kaname's challenge: something else she didn't really want to think about, but for different reasons. Did her school president really think that a spar would solve anything? Or did her request to "come alone" indicate that something more sinister was afoot?

With a heavy sigh, Hazuki realized that there was only one way, really, to clear her head right now.

She rose slowly to her feet and opened her wardrobe. What did one wear to a duel, anyway? Full ceremonial kendo garb seemed inappropriate for some reason: that suggested respectful competition, which this was almost certainly not going to be.

Instead, her eyes were drawn to the familiar uniform hanging separate from the others. That would do nicely. After shedding her pajamas, she took her old sailor- *fuku* down from its hanger and slipped it on. If she was going to dress for battle, she was going to do it right. It was slightly too small for her now, with the shirt not quite able to tuck into the skirt: an indication of how much she had grown, literally, on her journey to find Hatsumi. The *Souma* within had truly changed her inside and out.

Unfortunately, the extent of those changes was something she was still discovering.

She put a stop to that thought, knowing full well where it would lead. Instead, she got out a fresh roll of bandages and began to methodically wrap her leg, exchanging one series of regrets for another.

For a moment she considered bringing her entire equipment bag, but that felt unnecessary. All she needed was a weapon, really. After pondering it for a few moments, she retrieved only her *bokken* from the duffel, leaving the helmet, gauntlets and chestpiece inside. She tested its heft and gave it a couple of quick twirls. The team almost never sparred with these hardwood katana, choosing instead the relative safety of the hardened bamboo *shinai* . The potential for bruising was certainly going to be high, but only if she allowed herself to be hit.

And she certainly had no intention of *that* .

Feeling properly attired and more or less armed for battle, Hazuki quietly slipped out into the hallway, pointedly took the direction that would *not* lead her past Kaname's room, and within minutes was out in the unusually warm early-morning air. The gates around the dormitory grounds were closed and locked, of course, but this was hardly a concern: with a short running start she was able to leap over the fence with two feet to spare, turning a somersault in midair for good measure as she cleared the highest bars.

Yes, there was a *lot* she'd been holding back since coming to live in this new world.

In spite of her best efforts to keep her head clear, her mood began to steadily sour as she made the long walk to the equestrian range. Had she really thought she'd be able to fit in here, living this hand-me-down life of her unfortunate predecessor? Had she truly believed that she could just be an ordinary girl, going through the ordinary life battles of learning, teaching, and trying to find love? Twice upon a time, in both sets of memories, she had struggled with her own self-identity as a lesbian, but even that seemed far away when compared

to her calling and her immortality, which set her apart from not just society, but *humanity* .

Chikaru had explained a long time ago that her own drift toward asexuality had been because of wanting to be like her sister, but it had always seemed strange to Hazuki that Naoko would have been celibate. After all, when Eve had been Hatsumi, she had certainly never been shy about dating, and Hazuki still vividly remembered several individual heartbreaks of witnessing her angel kissing someone other than her. Maybe Chikaru had realized, deep down, how Naoko's gift had changed her, and had become what she was now simply as a matter of subconscious self-defense.

Romantic love and sex… aren't important to me. Not like they are to you.

Was there an answer? There were two women in this world that she was deeply in love with, but Chikaru could not love her because of who she had become, and Tamao could not love her because she was terrified. Hazuki had reached a place of peace with her feelings for Chikaru -- at least, most of the time -- but how could she ever reconcile having hurt Tamao just by being what she was?

She hopped the low fence around the largest of the equestrian rings, then slowly stepped out to the very center. A late waning moon still shone, and the only sound was that of a gentle wind through the trees. Outside, all was peaceful. Inside Hazuki's head, however, there was only turmoil.

For a long moment, she stood very still, her *bokken* held before her at the ready. Then, for the first time since coming back to Astraea, she flipped that switch inside herself and let loose.

Tamao opened her eyes, deciding that further sleep was simply not going to happen. Hoping not to wake either of the other two girls in the room, she quietly slid back her covers, stepped into the slippers

she'd left there beside her bed, and went into the bathroom to brush her teeth.

Originally, Shizuma's plan to arrive Monday evening and leave with Nagisa the following morning would not have been so awkward as this, as Tamao had hoped to be able to give them the room and spend the night with either Hazuki, Chikaru or both. Upon learning that Tamao was having difficulties after the unnamed incident at Summer School, Shizuma had been quick to say she would simply leave and find a hotel in town rather than stay and risk making Tamao uncomfortable, but Tamao had insisted that she stay.

Another sleepless night later, she wondered if that had been such a good idea; she'd probably kept both of them awake with all her tossing and turning. And soon Nagisa would be asking well-meaning questions again, and trying to convince Shizuma that they should delay their trip to keep Tamao company. It was still the sweetest gesture that her roommate would even entertain such a ridiculous idea, but Tamao couldn't let that happen. It was time to put on her bravest face and assure her friends that she would be fine on her own. She wouldn't allow herself to ever come between them again.

Of course, this was very much what she had always said to herself about Hazuki and Chikaru, and that wasn't working either at the moment, even if it was for completely different reasons.

Once finished brushing, she padded back out into the room to check the time. Five-thirty. Far too early for much of anything, really, but she didn't want to stay here either. Perhaps she'd just take her notebook down to the student lounge and try to put some thoughts on paper.

As she was considering this, though, she found her eyes drawn to the two sleeping figures in Nagisa's bed. Shizuma was curled around her younger fiancee, hugging her closely from behind, her normally sharp features softened by sleep and partially obscured by the mess of auburn hair. For her part, Nagisa had a blissful expression on her pretty face, just the hint of a smile gracing her lips.

It had not come easily for the two of them, and Tamao knew that better than just about anyone. They had been through so much to reach this place of comfort in one another's embrace, and there had been several times along the path when either of them could have walked away for good. This could have ended in misery had they not each learned to let go and allow themselves to be loved.

They were beautiful, the pair of them. Beautiful in their unity, and in their peace. And for the tiniest glimmer of a moment, Tamao fancied that they, too, made the whole world green.

At that moment, Tamao made her decision.

Leaving the sleeping lovers where they lay, still dressed in her pajamas and slippers, Tamao exited the room and quietly latched the door behind her.

Hazuki was a silent whirlwind, striking down foe after foe, just as she had during her travels. From sparrow ninjas to a monstrous cat-god, from bandits holding a city under siege to thrashing carnivorous vines, she still remembered every fight. Even after months in this comparative paradise, even in the comfort of this "normal" life, the ability to strike and kill had never been far from her conscious thoughts.

This was what her life was: not a student, not a teacher, and certainly not a lover. This was really all she was good at, wasn't it?

By the time the sun broke the horizon she had been in constant motion for close to two hours, and while she had somehow failed yet to break a sweat, her face was streaked with tears as she continued hacking away at the demons inside her, and the only sound was that of her *bokken* slicing the air.

Chikaru broke out of her trance at the sound of a soft knock at her door. She quickly got up from her bed and hurried to answer. It

probably wasn't Hazuki, as she would have known the door was unlocked and simply come in, so maybe that meant it was…

She breathed a sigh of something like relief as she took in the sight of her visitor. "Good morning, Tamao-chan."

"May I come in, Chikaru-sama?" Tamao asked in a quiet voice.

"Of course."

Tamao looked over Chikaru's state of dress as she came inside. "Did I wake you?"

"No, I was meditating," Chikaru smiled, glancing over her pajamas. "I don't really sleep very much anymore."

After nodding slowly in response, Tamao spent a few moments absently rubbing her hands together and looking around the room. Chikaru gave her all the time she needed: Tamao had made the effort to come here, so there was obviously something she needed to say.

"Chikaru-sama," Tamao began, but quickly trailed off.

"You know you don't need to call me that," Chikaru said softly after a few seconds passed.

With a hesitant smile, Tamao continued. "Chikaru… I need to hear the whole story. All of it. Every insane detail that you can think of. I need to understand this."

"The whole story," Chikaru agreed.

The young poet took a deep breath and looked up to meet Chikaru's eyes. "I need to know who I'm in love with," she said steadily.

"Tamao-chan," Chikaru sighed, reaching out to enfold the younger girl in the warmest of embraces. Tamao crumpled against her and

held her in return, and for a long while, neither of them said another word.

It was Chikaru who finally broke the comfortable silence. "I'll tell you as much as I can, but we need Hazuki-chan before we can truly tell you everything. Hers is the far more complicated story, and I won't do her the disservice of trying to tell it for her."

"I know. I was actually hoping she'd be here. I went by her room first, but I don't think she was there."

"Hmm, off to an early start, then," Chikaru mused.

Tamao reluctantly broke from the hug, her brow furrowed. "Do you know where she is?"

"No," Chikaru replied, craning her neck to see her bedside clock. "But I know where she's going to be in a little over an hour. Her much-beloved student council president has challenged her to a spar out at the equestrian range."

"What?" Tamao all but yelped, a look of surprise and anxiety crossing her face. "Since when are they on good enough terms to spar together?"

"They're not. Based on the fact that she requested that Hazuki-chan come alone, I daresay it's more of a duel."

"You weren't *really* going to let her go alone, were you?" Tamao asked with obvious concern.

"Mmm, I don't know, the note Kaname-san left was quite clear on that point…"

"Chikaru!"

"However, I must admit the thought of a nice brisk walk across campus this morning *had* crossed my mind," Chikaru winked, but even as she said this, another thought brought an even deeper smile

to her face. "Tamao-chan, do you have your naginata and your gear back at your room?"

"Yes, why?"

"Give me a few minutes to get dressed, and then I'll meet you there."

As the hour approached, Hazuki was quick to see the lone figure striding toward the fenced-off track, equipment bag slung to one side and sword held over the opposite shoulder. Of course, with her battle-senses currently sharpened to needle-point, she would likely have noticed had a mouse crossed into her guarded area, much less a person of Kaname's stature.

Only here did she stop going through her katas, choosing instead to pace in a slow circle and re-center herself. Hopefully she'd gotten everything out of her system: as much as she had come to loathe her council president, she had no desire to lose control against her.

Kaname swung herself over the low fence, then set down her bag. "You're early," she called.

"Well, I wouldn't want to miss it," Hazuki replied.

Nodding in acknowledgment, Kaname opened her bag and took out a standard kendo chest-protector. Hazuki watched for a moment as Kaname buckled it on over her shirt, then turned away and resumed stretching.

A few minutes later, fully armored with chestpiece, gauntlets and helmet, Kaname walked out to the center of the ring to square off with her. "Aren't you going to put on your fighting gear?" she asked, looking over Hazuki's unfamiliar uniform.

"This *is* my fighting gear," Hazuki replied, drilling the older girl with her gaze.

Kaname shook her head and scowled. "You're really a piece of work, do you know that?"

"So I've been told. As the challenged party, may I ask the rules to this little exercise? I have a feeling you have more in mind than a standard two-point match."

"How about until one of us has learned her lesson?" Kaname sneered, raising her *bokken* and holding it at the ready.

"I don't think I've ever agreed with you more," Hazuki smiled in reply, mirroring her opponent's pose.

They faced off for several seconds, each waiting for the other to make the first move, eyes locked, neither of them so much as twitching.

"What's going on out here?" a voice called.

Both Kaname and Hazuki lowered their swords and looked in the direction from which the voice had come, only to see Amane and Hikari emerging from the stables, both of them dressed for riding.

Muttering a curse, Kaname looked away, walking in a slow circle as the two Etoile approached.

"Kenjyo-san, Azuma-san, what are you doing here?" Amane asked, looking them over cautiously.

"Nothing you need to be concerned with, Etoile-sama," Kaname growled. "Azuma-san and I are having a private spar."

Amane raised her eyebrows "So you chose to have your 'private spar' out here, where Hikari and I spend every morning riding?"

"I thought you'd be busy with your *duties*, Etoile-sama."

Hazuki exchanged glances with Hikari. Noting that the young Etoile looked deeply concerned at what was before her, Hazuki offered

what she hoped was a reassuring smile. Whether or not the attempt at assurance had worked, Hikari spoke next. "Well, we don't have any appointments for a couple of hours yet, so if you don't mind, Amane-senpai, perhaps we could watch for a while? Hazuki-san has taught me *so* much in the Self-Defense Club: I'd love to see how she handles a sword."

"Yes, I think that would be a fine idea," Amane nodded, looking skeptically at a fuming Kaname. "Don't mind us. We'll just enjoy the match from right over here."

That said, the two Etoile took their place just outside the fence, near where Kaname had left her bag. While part of Hazuki found herself resenting the intrusion, most of her was actually growing quite amused, particularly at Kaname's reaction. *Someone* was definitely having a tough time holding her focus.

"Shall we get on with it?" Hazuki asked, arching her eyebrows.

"Yes, let's," Kaname grated, once again coming to a ready position. Hazuki matched her, making a quick study of her stance and trying to determine where first to strike.

But once again, before they could engage, another voice interrupted them. "Well! It would appear we weren't the only ones who thought this would be a good morning for a workout!"

This time Kaname's curse was quite a bit louder as she stalked a few steps away. Hazuki whirled around at the familiar voice, and to her deep shock, she saw Chikaru, Tamao, Nagisa and Shizuma approaching, the former three with their naginata resting on their shoulders. As the former Etoile and her fiancee broke off from the group to warmly greet Amane and Hikari, Chikaru and Tamao came out to meet a stunned Hazuki.

"What are you doing here?" Hazuki asked quietly, looking from Chikaru to Tamao.

"Well, Shizuma-sama is here to take Nagisa-chan on a trip, but since their flight's not for a few hours yet, she said she'd love to see some of the moves you've been teaching to her beloved. We're not *interrupting* anything, are we?"

"Sort of," Hazuki replied skeptically. Chikaru knew all about the duel, of course; was she playing dumb for Kaname's benefit?

"Oh well, there's plenty of room. You two get back to taking out your aggressions, and we'll just be over this way doing some non-contact drills so that Nagisa-chan can impress her girlfriend."

"And then afterwards?" Tamao added softly, giving Hazuki a meaningful smile. "I think the three of us are due for a nice, cozy talk. I understand it's a long story, and I don't want to miss a word of it."

Hazuki stared at Tamao, feeling the weight of the world suddenly lifted from her heart as she smiled hesitantly in reply. It wasn't over at all. She was going to have her chance to tell Tamao everything, and by the look on her face, Tamao was ready to hear it all. "I'm looking forward to that," she whispered.

Tamao glanced over at Kaname, then turned back to Hazuki and winked. "Don't be long." That said, she walked back to join the others.

Looking positively apoplectic, Kaname turned furious eyes on Chikaru. "Don't you *dare* think I'll go easy on her just because *you're* here," she scowled.

Chikaru shook her head slowly at her Spica counterpart and smiled. "Oh, Kaname-san, you really *are* stupid sometimes. Do you really think I'm here to protect *her?* "

After letting those words sink in, Chikaru flipped her naginata onto her other shoulder and strode back toward the others. "This way,

butterflies! Let's start over here: that should give our sensei *plenty* of room."

For a long moment, Hazuki watched them go, and for the first time all morning, she found that she didn't really *want* to fight. She would much rather drag Tamao off somewhere and kiss her senseless. And Chikaru too, for that matter. What on earth was there to fight about, anyway?

Her thoughts were interrupted by a voice that had passed beyond anger, straight through rage and was now lodged deeply within fury. "I told you to come *alone* ."

Oh yes, that.

Hazuki turned to face her seething council president. "And I did," she nodded. "I'm curious, though, President Kenjyo-sama. You weren't afraid to duel me in front of a crowd when it was tennis. Why so insistent that we be alone for this? Is this really just a spar, or did you want to get me someplace where there would be no… *witnesses?* "

Kaname's eyes widened for a moment behind her mask, and Hazuki realized that she had crossed the line. "Is that the sort of person you think I am, Azuma?" she whispered, bringing her sword up. "A murderer?"

Bringing her own sword to the ready, Hazuki decided to stay on the other side of that line for just a little longer. "You tell me, Kenjyo-sama. I already know you're a rapist."

With an inarticulate shout of rage, Kaname took the first swing, and the battle was on.

For a few moments, Hazuki found herself back on her heels, and it was all too clear why Kaname had once been captain of the kendo team. She was good -- possibly as good as Kojima-sensei -- and was faster than anyone Hazuki had ever fought in this world. Plus, she was fighting with a full head of steam, and while her anger would

likely be her undoing in the long run, it was giving her quite a burst of energy in the here and now. When Hazuki had fought Kojima-sensei, she had remained on the defensive out of choice. Fighting Kaname, she was finding herself on the defensive out of necessity.

Kaname's furious attack soon ended, however, and she took a step back, panting heavily as she made a wary circle around her opponent. "Don't presume to talk about things you can't understand," she hissed.

"You want me to understand, Kenjyo-sama? *Make me.* "

Now it was Hazuki's turn to close for the attack, driving Kaname back several steps as she pressed relentlessly forward, coming at her from all directions with her swings. Once again, Hazuki found herself oddly impressed with the skill shown by her adversary. She could respect this, at least, even if she found everything else about the woman repulsive. Still, it was not taking Hazuki long at all to find the cracks in that armor, as the samurai inside her dissected the other girl's technique almost dispassionately.

Quite suddenly, a counter-swing took her completely off-guard, and only by springing away in a backward somersault did Hazuki manage to dodge the blow. For all her obvious skill, Kaname was fighting with an almost random element in her technique, and Hazuki realized that she was going to have to be more careful.

Or perhaps not, as Kaname was suddenly standing very still, staring at her. "How did you do that?" she asked, amazement showing through her anger.

For a moment, Hazuki wasn't sure what Kaname had meant, but then she realized how far away the other girl was. In dodging, she'd leaped a full twenty feet in a single backward bound. "I try to be light on my feet."

Dropping back into a fighting crouch, Kaname shook her head slowly. "No former cripple should be able to move like that."

"Don't presume to talk about things you can't understand," Hazuki smiled grimly before charging in again.

For a while, the heavy sound of wooden sword against wooden sword was all there was. Distantly, Hazuki was aware that everyone was watching them now, but she had expected that. Not for a moment did Hazuki believe that anyone had actually come out here to run naginata drills.

While a very real part of Hazuki was reveling in the idea of humiliating her long-time nemesis in front of witnesses, however, she was quickly beginning to wonder what the point of that would be. She was more than confident that she could do it, but like Kojima-sensei months before, she had nothing to gain from embarrassing her foe. She had nothing to prove to any of the people watching.

When next they broke off, Hazuki looked at Kaname steadily. The other girl was panting loudly and drenched with sweat, but still had her sword held out defiantly. "Listen," Hazuki offered. "How about we end this farce now? Let's both just put our swords down and call it a draw."

"Not as good as you thought you were?" Kaname laughed. "You want to quit now just because you can't seem to touch me?"

Hazuki raised an eyebrow, then with a blur of movement, she landed two blows to Kaname's chestpiece, one to her wrists to knock her *bokken* from her grasp, and another to the side of her helmet, winding up behind her in the process. "As I was saying," she continued.

Kaname scrambled for her sword and whirled to face Hazuki again. "How did you--?"

"I'm getting sick of locking horns with you, President Kenjyo-sama. Why did you want to fight me, anyway? I almost wish you *did* have some ulterior motive, because that would at least explain things a little better. What did you hope to gain by fighting me alone?"

"I want you out of my head," Kaname said in a low monotone. "Ever since the day you arrived here, you've been under my skin, just like *she* was, and I'm tired of it!"

"Just like *who* was?"

"And now you've got little sister doing it, too! The sooner I'm done with *both* of you, the sooner I can get on with my life!"

"What, and you thought beating me in kendo would help, somehow?"

Kaname's answer was a guttural cry as she once more sprang to attack. Hazuki brought her *bokken* back up to parry off several blows in short succession, then locked hilts with her, pressed forward, and bodily shoved her back several feet.

Then, without warning, there was a loud rumble, almost like thunder, and suddenly the inside of Hazuki's head was on fire, as though her *Souma* were burning her from within. She let out an agonized cry and staggered back a step, jamming her eyes shut against the green glow that filled her vision, but this did nothing: it was as though the light was shining from inside her eyes.

Next came the more conventional pain of a *bokken* hitting her full-force in the side of the head. She fell in a boneless heap, distantly aware of voices crying out in shock, and tried desperately to clear the cobwebs in her skull before Kaname could take further advantage.

When her sight returned, she saw Kaname standing over her, but the older girl's face was turned toward the sky, her eyes and mouth alike widened in shock. Looking up, Hazuki could easily see why.

The sky was tearing open. A dark fissure had appeared in the blue of the early morning, and with each rumble of unearthly thunder, it split a little wider, and Hazuki's head burned more intensely.

"Periperi," she choked out. She'd seen this once before, in the world where she'd met young Milka: each time the sky opened, the child would collapse into agony, and only after several such events had Lilith managed to divine the cause and save her.

Their book. The book in the Great Library that contained their world was being damaged.

Hazuki scrambled unsteadily to her feet and took a quick look around. Chikaru had dropped to her knees, obviously in pain as well, and Tamao was beside her, but everyone else was looking skyward at the ever-widening gulf of starless black.

Before Hazuki could rush to Chikaru's side, though, there was a flash of light in the void, and something streaked out of that emptiness, heading straight for her. She and Kaname dove to either side as something huge landed in the center of the equestrian range, causing the ground to tremble with the impact. Hazuki hit the ground rolling, and as she sprang up somewhat dizzily she turned to see what had entered the world in such a violent manner as this.

The dust from the impact was slowly clearing, and as it did, something moved. Something lithe and reptilian, with shimmering red scales and leathery wings. Something twenty feet in length from the horns of its nose to the barb of its tail. Something with claws that tore the groomed earth beneath it, and a wide mouth filled with innumerable dagger-like teeth.

For a moment, Hazuki stared fixedly at this impossibility, scarcely believing that any such thing could exist in this idyllic setting, but there it was. A dragon. On Astraea Hill.

Behind the beast, Kaname was crab-crawling backward, trying to scramble away. This seemed to catch its attention, however, and it began to stomp toward her, letting out a roar as it advanced.

Deep-seated animosity or not, Hazuki was not about to allow Kaname to be eaten by a monstrous reptile from another world. "

HEY!" she shouted at it, wiping the blood from her face and taking a few steps forward. "Over here! Look over here!"

To her only momentary relief, the dragon wound its neck around to glare at her with glowing orange eyes, then turned and crept slowly toward her, allowing Kaname the time to get to her feet.

"That's right, this way!" Hazuki shouted again, backing away slowly in an attempt to lead it away from not just Kaname, but the crowd by the fence as well. *Chikaru,* she thought, *if ever you've read my mind before, PLEASE tell me you brought my knife.*

The monster's nostrils flared as it sniffed its way toward Hazuki, then its mouth opened in a terrifying approximation of a smile. " ***Souma…"*** it hissed.

Even as it said this, Hazuki felt her *Souma* intensify, though not painfully this time, and she became aware that her movements were leaving a trail of green sparks. "Got it in one," she nodded. "You looking for me, then?"

" ***Souma…"*** it repeated, pulling up short before Hazuki and rearing back onto its hind legs.

"What do you want with me?" she asked in a pale reflection of its growl.

" ***DIE!"*** the dragon screeched, and its head shot forward faster than a striking cobra. Hazuki leaped clear as its jaws snapped shut on the precise spot where she had been standing, leaving a huge gouge in the dirt.

Hazuki was distantly aware of a scream which sounded a lot like Hikari, but then she was in battle, and there was no more time for distraction. Her leap had carried her to one side, and no sooner had she landed than she was springing again, this time straight at the dragon's back. It whirled its head around to face her and struck again, but she was already in motion, leaping to grasp the elbow

joint of one its wings and give it a savage twist. The dragon screamed as Hazuki felt something popping and snapping beneath her hands, and then she was thrown clear as the wing thrashed to the side. Still somewhat dizzy from the blow she had taken to the head earlier, she was not able to land properly this time, and she felt the wind knocked from her as she slammed into the ground, losing her *bokken* with the impact. In moments, the dragon was above her, rearing back to strike as before, but then its eyes went wide and it emitted another piercing shriek of agony.

And then Chikaru was there, Hazuki's sword full-sized and glowing with *Souma* in her hands, the shredded remains of bandages still clinging to its blade. She took another hack at the monster's hindquarters, cutting through scale and flesh alike, getting a shower of ichor for her efforts. As the dragon staggered back, one wing trailing and limping badly from its wound, Chikaru raced toward Hazuki and pulled her to her feet. As their hands joined, the sparks covering both of them intensified, and Hazuki felt her head clear slightly with their shared strength.

"Look at you; you're a natural after all," Hazuki panted. "Thanks for the save."

"My pleasure," Chikaru nodded, passing the sword to Hazuki. "I trust there's a story behind this?"

"Couldn't tell you. *Get back!* " The last shout came as the beast lunged forward again, snapping at them with its jaws. It looked as though it were trying to take to the air, but its injured wing would not allow it. Instead, it thrashed forward, moving far more quickly than any beast its size should have been able, and it was all Hazuki could do to keep one leap ahead of those teeth and lead it further away from Chikaru. If this thing had come here looking for *Souma*, Hazuki realized, she was not the only one in danger.

Taking a quick scan of their surroundings, Hazuki felt a rush of pride as she saw Tamao and Nagisa standing protectively in front of Hikari and Shizuma, holding their naginata at the ready. Both of them

looked petrified and ready to pass out, and the hardwood and bamboo of their practice weapons would likely be useless, but there they were nonetheless.

But with only four of them there, where was Amane?

Hazuki got her answer as the Prince of Spica charged into the middle of the ring, scooped up Hazuki's discarded *bokken*, and vaulted onto the dragon's back as though it were a show-horse. Situated as she was at the shoulders, it could not crane its snakelike neck around to snap at her, and Amane proceeded to beat it soundly across the back of the head with the hardwood sword.

" *Dammit, Amane-sama, get out of here!"* Hazuki shouted as she dashed forward, wondering when 'fighting dragons' had found its way into the standard list of Etoile duties. Sparks flew from the red scales as Hazuki delivered another wicked cut to the dragon's flank, opposite where Chikaru had hit it before.

With another ear-splitting screech, the monster began to thrash its neck from one side to the other with such intensity that Amane had to reach all the way around and hold on for dear life lest she be tossed violently to the ground. While it continued to writhe with pain and fury, Kaname streaked up from the opposite side and jammed her bokken into the open wound Chikaru had delivered. The dragon's screams doubled yet again, and it whipped its tail around to slam Kaname in the head and send her sprawling to the ground.

Then Chikaru was back, this time with her naginata, which she used to pierce the leathery part of its good wing, tearing the membrane with a downward yank and pulling free before she could be bowled over by the sweeping pinion.

Wondering briefly if everyone around her had gone insane, Hazuki dropped to the ground, rolled beneath the belly of the monster as it reared up again, and with a silent prayer that she was guessing correctly, she thrust her sword upward into its more vulnerable underside.

Thrashing more than ever, now, the dragon wrenched itself off the bloody sword and scrambled away, finally throwing Amane from its back as it did, but by this time it was too late. Its movements gradually slowed, and at last it toppled heavily to the ground, blood oozing from its many wounds, and was still.

Still very much in battlefield mode, Hazuki dashed to where Kaname had fallen. The other girl looked concussed and disoriented, but was still breathing: apparently her helmet had taken the worst of the blow, but Hazuki guessed her ears would be ringing for days to come.

"Is she okay?" Amane asked, hurrying over to join them.

"She's alive," Hazuki reported, looking up at the Etoile. The simple act of looking up, however, caused Amane, who had moments before leaped onto the back of a dragon, to actually lurch back away from her. "What is it, Etoile-sama?"

"Hazuki-san, your eyes…" Amane said in a small voice.

"What about them?"

"They're glowing," Chikaru said, running up to them. "And I'm guessing mine are too?" she added as she knelt beside Hazuki, dropped her naginata, and held out her hand, which was still trailing sparks in the air.

"They are," Hazuki nodded, looking into Chikaru's eyes and seeing that they had transformed from soft brown to blazing green. She took her dear friend's hand, and the two of them began to glow brighter, even as another crack of thunder split the silence. Now it was not just the sky opening: cracks were appearing in the ground, the walls of the stables, and even the trees. The distant spire of the cathedral split as though it had been hacked by a sword, but rather than crumble to the ground, the sundered part of the tower simply hung in mid-air beside the remainder.

"Time to go, then?" Chikaru asked, passing Hazuki her scabbard and shooting her a quirky yet terrified little smile.

"I think it is," Hazuki gasped as the *Souma* between them began to burn again, and the very air around them began to glow. Now that she was coming down from the battle, she felt a sharp pulling sensation within. "You feel it too?"

"Yes," Chikaru nodded. "What do we do now?"

"I don't know. I've never tried to shift worlds on my own before. I don't know that I can."

Chikaru, in obvious pain, still managed to give Hazuki a more genuine smile. "Then we'll try it together, Hazuki-chan?"

"Together," Hazuki repeated, pulling her into a brief hug. She then turned back to a wide-eyed Amane. "Etoile-sama, you'd better get back."

"What's happening?" Amane asked, backing slowly away. "Do you need me to get help?"

"Yes, fine, get help, just do it from over there! I'm not sure how this is going to work!"

There were more footsteps then as the remaining four hurried over, each of them in varying degrees of shock. "Hazuki!" Tamao cried as she saw them. "Chikaru! What's happening to you?"

"Stay back, Tamao-chan!" Chikaru called through gritted teeth as the glow around them grew further in intensity.

"We have to go!" Hazuki gasped, turning her now luminescent eyes on her beloved friend, wishing she had time to tell her everything in her heart. "I'm sorry it's so sudden. We'll be back, I promise!"

"Where are you going?" Tamao shouted over the increasing thunderclaps as reality continued to come apart around them.

"Hopefully to fix this!" Hazuki tried to smile as she stretched out one hand toward her. "I love you, Tamao! I swear, I'll get us back!"

"I won't let you leave me!" Tamao screamed, and she dashed the remaining thirty feet to grasp that outstretched hand.

The moment they touched, the world exploded with green, and Hazuki felt the unsettlingly familiar pull of transit between worlds. This one, however, was more violent than any she had experienced in all her travels, and her senses were quickly overtaken by fire and sound, leaving her hurtling unconscious into the void.

Hikari shielded her eyes as the four girls were engulfed in an aura of green radiance, which soon shot upwards into the heavens, streaking toward that horrible darkness in the shattered sky. By the time she had blinked the spots from her eyes, there was nothing left where they had been. Chikaru, Tamao, Hazuki and Kaname were gone.

As soon as the streak of light disappeared into the blackness, all the color seemed to drain out of the world around them, flowing like watery paints into these cracks in reality. The air was growing thin, and Hikari's lungs began to ache as she gasped for breath. She tried to move, but her limbs felt like they were made of stone, and she could hear her pulse thudding more and more slowly in her ears as time slowed to a crawl.

Beside her, but seemingly from a great distance, she heard Nagisa murmuring a prayer. Shizuma gathered the smaller girl in her arms, buried her face in her beloved's hair, and whispered "I love you, Nagisa."

As the world came to an end around them, Hikari did the only sensible thing she could, and fainted dead away into Amane's arms.

Next: Books

Books

No feet to fall, you need no ground

Allowed to glide right through the sun

Released from circles guarded tight

Now we all are chosen ones

-Indigo Girls

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Pariah dogs and wandering madmen

Barking at strangers and speaking in tongues

The ebb and flow of tidal fortunes

Electrical changes are charging up the young

It's a far cry from the world we thought we'd inherit

-Rush

Part 18: Books

"Hazuki? Hazuki, can you hear me?"

The familiar voice was the first thing to bring Hazuki back to reality, but when she opened her eyes, the world was a dark, spinning blur that made her stomach revolt. Forcibly clamping down on her nausea, she made an effort to find her feet, but that seemed to be a bit much to ask just yet.

Her senses seemed to be returning one by one, starting with hearing, then progressing into the feel of something square pressing into the small of her back, and a strong smell of paper. Once she felt a little more centered, she opened her eyes again, this time to see a slightly glassy-appearing Chikaru looking down at her. "Are you okay?" Hazuki asked in a cracked voice.

"Never better," Chikaru smiled faintly. "Actually, that's a lie. I'm glad I didn't have breakfast before we came out to meet you this morning, otherwise it'd be all over these books right now."

With some effort, Hazuki managed to push herself to her knees. They were in a pile of books, weapons and limbs, with tall bookcases stretching as far as the eye could see in either direction. The Great Library. They'd made it this far, at least, but the area around them was in chaos. Several of the shelves in their immediate area were broken, and books were scattered all over the smooth stone floor. Suddenly aware that she was lying all over several worlds, Hazuki made an effort to extract herself.

Among the books, however, were far too many arms and legs to be hers and Chikaru's alone, and Hazuki realized that more than two of them had made the journey.

"It looks like Tamao and Kaname came with us," Chikaru explained, but even as she said it, the other two girls were beginning to stir. Chikaru herself was holding onto her naginata for support, but what had once been a practice weapon had changed dramatically: the shaft was of a dark, glossy wood, ornately carved with innumerable butterflies, and the blade had transformed from bamboo to shining steel.

"Yeah, I'm glad I grabbed this again before we… shifted," Chikaru smiled, noting that Hazuki was peering at the weapon. "It might just come in handy. I presume this is the library you told me so much about?"

Hazuki nodded as she helped Tamao get clear of the haphazard pile of books. She, too, was still holding a similarly transformed naginata, which Hazuki carefully took from her hands before it could get dragged across any pages. Once Tamao was seated wobbily on a bare piece of floor, Hazuki went back to help Kaname stand.

As it turned out, the Spica president had undergone a greater transformation than any of them. Not only had her bokken been replaced by a beautiful katana, but her sparring gear had morphed into what looked like a variation on the traditional samurai *o-yoroi* armor, only more sleek and even feminine in design. Her helmet and face-mask were ironically decorated with snarling dragons, as was the pommel of her sword. Behind the visor, though, her eyes were wide and vacant.

"Are you okay?" Hazuki asked her.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Kaname said in a thick voice.

"You might want to take your helmet off first," Hazuki advised as she helped Kaname off to the side and propped her up against an intact set of shelves. "And don't throw up on any of the books."

"Where are we, Hazuki-chan?" Tamao asked weakly.

Hazuki did not answer, as she found herself focused on one of the books in particular, which lay open atop the others. On one side, several pages were torn and barely hanging on, while on the other, a deep furrow had been carved into the unreadable text, cutting down through innumerable other pages beneath. Dark drops of what could only be blood stained the visible pages. Taking the greatest care not to damage it further, Hazuki knelt beside the tome and picked it up from the pile.

After Hazuki remained silent a while longer, Chikaru spoke instead. "If I'm remembering the stories correctly, Tamao-chan, we're in a place between worlds."

"Between… worlds?"

"You can pick your own metaphor if you like," Hazuki said in elaboration. "A crossroads, a nexus… Either way, it's a library, and each of these books is a world. This one… is ours."

"Is it bad?" Chikaru asked gently, noting the claw-marks on the covers along with the torn and disheveled pages. She set aside her naginata and held out her hands, and Hazuki carefully passed it to her.

"Nagisa-chan," Tamao whispered. "Is she okay? Are they all okay?"

"I think so," Hazuki nodded slowly, trying to regain her focus enough to remember some of the details of her life in this library. "Lilith told me about this once. She said that if a book gets damaged, time stops inside until it gets fixed."

"Then how do we fix it?" Chikaru asked.

"We don't. Lilith does. Which means we have a very real reason to find her now." Hazuki then raised her voice to shout into the darkness. "Aaya, we're here!"

Her voice echoed back to them several times, but there was no reply.

"Lilith!" Hazuki called. "Can anyone hear me? Aaya, we're here, like you wanted!"

Kaname, by this time, had managed to strip off the unfamiliar helmet, and was taking a series of deep breaths. "What did you do, Azuma-kun?" she growled, running a gauntleted hand through her short hair.

Pointedly ignoring her, Hazuki went on calling. "Ken-chan? Kogechibi? Anyone?"

"Answer my question, Azuma-kun! What did you *do?* "

Hazuki took a short breath, then crossed the short space between herself and Kaname, grabbed the girl by the shoulders, and slammed her up against one of the pillars between shelves. "Listen carefully, Kaname, because we're only going this way once. Where we are is in *deep* trouble, and *this* is how things are going to work. You're in *my* nightmare now, so that condescending Azuma-kun crap of yours ends *right* now. You will call me Hazuki, and you will do *exactly* what I say, because until we get back to our world you're not my student council president anymore: you're just another person I need to keep alive. Do you understand?"

Kaname turned away, unable to meet Hazuki's furious eyes, so Hazuki grabbed her by the chin and forced her face back around. "I said *do you understand?* "

As soon as Hazuki's hand made contact with Kaname's skin, however, something stirred in her *Souma*, and for a disorienting moment, she did not recognize what it was. Then, with dawning surprise, she realized that energy was passing between them, just as it did whenever she touched Chikaru.

"What are you doing to me?" Kaname quavered.

Eyes wide and unblinking, Hazuki stretched her other hand back toward the others. "Tamao-chan," she whispered, "could you give me your hand, please?"

Tamao got shakily to her feet and stepped around the clutter of books to take the offered hand. There was a spark as they touched, just like the first night at Summer School, but this time it settled quickly into the familiar transfer of shared *Souma*, and Tamao inhaled sharply at the sensation. Though her own thoughts were swimming, Hazuki tried to drop into a focused state, and even in her distraction it was all too easy to notice the tiny suns of energy flickering away inside both of the other girls.

Hazuki turned shocked eyes on Chikaru. "They have their own *Souma* . Both of them."

"Oh my," Chikaru breathed. A jumble of conflicting emotions briefly warred with one another on her pretty face, but then she settled on one of her quirky half-grins. "That… certainly makes things interesting, doesn't it?"

" *Souma* ?" Tamao repeated. "This is… what you showed me at Summer School, isn't it? What is it?"

"It's the thing that makes the world green, Tamao-chan," Chikaru smiled.

"I don't care *what* it is," Kaname panted, jerking back away from Hazuki's touch. "Get it out of me! I don't *want* it!"

"Sorry, Kaname, but I think you're stuck with it," Hazuki sighed. She then nodded slowly toward Chikaru. "It makes sense, actually. You have to have *Souma* to jump between worlds, so they wouldn't even be here if they didn't have their own now. It must have gone to them when the portal opened."

While Tamao seemed merely dazed by everything happening around her, Kaname was literally squirming, clawing her hands over her arms as through trying to rip out this new energy inside her. "Get it out of me," she said again, this time in a tremulous whisper. "I don't want it, I don't want it, get it *out* of me!"

"You're going to be fine, Kaname," Chikaru said in a soothing voice, passing the book carefully to Tamao and reaching out to grab both of the Spica president's hands. "Just relax. It won't hurt you."

Kaname struggled, but Chikaru's grip was surprisingly firm. She brought one hand to cup the terrified girl's cheek, and slowly, Kaname's shaking subsided, and her breathing slowed.

"Better?" Chikaru asked, giving the taller girl a soft smile.

After opening and closing her mouth a couple of times, Kaname nodded quickly. Chikaru then gave her a gentle pat on her armored

shoulder and turned back to the others.

"Well, Hazuki-chan, since you're the one with experience here, where shall we go next?"

"We search the place out," Hazuki nodded, gesturing toward the mess around them. "Find out what happened to cause this, and see if there's anyone left alive. If all else fails, we start checking for books with a strong *Souma* presence, to see if we can track down Eve and Lilith."

Casting her eyes over the seemingly endless shelves stretching out to either side, Chikaru made a sour face. "That could take some time."

"All the more reason to get started."

Leaving their damaged world where they had found it for the time being, Hazuki led them toward the center to try to get her bearings. Tamao walked beside her, alternating between holding Hazuki's hand and running her fingers along the spines of the books as they passed, and Chikaru and Kaname walked behind, with the Lulim president making a point to stay in constant contact with the dazed Spican.

Each level of the library, Hazuki remembered, was comprised of several concentric circular corridors, with numerous "spoke" paths connecting them to one another and to the center. She quickly found one of these spokes, and before long they arrived at the open central atrium, from which they could look up and down at the seemingly endless levels, each one like the others. In this open space floated fragments of pillars and arches reminiscent of ancient Greek temples, slowly turning in regular orbits, along with strings of huge crystalline stones that reflected the feeble light in all directions.

"It's beautiful," Tamao said in an awed whisper.

"It is," Chikaru agreed, shooting a half-smile at Hazuki. "Not quite like I pictured it from your descriptions, though."

"It's hard to do the place justice," Hazuki shrugged. "What were you expecting?"

"I don't know, I guess I just assumed Heaven would be better lit than this," Chikaru elaborated. "Awfully dark to do a lot of reading, wouldn't you say?"

On the broad pathway surrounding the central atrium were numerous double-helix spiral pathways connecting the levels. The nearest had been smashed in several places, its fragments turning in slow circles around the center along with the rest of the strange debris. Once determining that the next was still solid, Hazuki led them up one level, where they resumed their search.

Before long, they found signs of another disturbance, this time with an entire bookcase pulled down, and another damaged and bloodied tome sitting amongst the others. Hazuki took a look around, as if studying the area, then gently took up the torn volume. "Youko," she whispered.

"Who?" Tamao asked.

"She was a spy," Hazuki sighed. "One of the first people I met when I was looking for Hatsumi. I think it was sometime after the Russo-Japanese War, and we were on a train together. We saved each other's lives, and I helped her complete her mission." She looked up to meet Chikaru's curious eyes. "I knew from the moment I saw her that I could trust her, and it wasn't until months later that I realized she probably had some connection to Eve. I didn't know how to recognize the energy then."

"Touched by *Souma* ?" Chikaru asked.

"Almost certainly. She was an amazing martial artist, that's for sure."

Tamao knelt beside Hazuki and put one hand on the open page of the book. "Has time stopped in this world, too?"

Hazuki nodded, not certain whether to be impressed or concerned at Tamao's observation. "With that damage, it must have."

"It… feels different," Tamao said quietly. "The other books sort of… *hum* under your hands, but this one and ours are both very still."

"You're taking all of this very well, Tamao-chan," Chikaru smiled.

Tamao looked up into Hazuki's eyes, her expression almost sad. "You're not from our world," she said as a statement rather than a question. "That's how Naoko-sama was able to grow up with you and Chikaru both."

"That's right," Hazuki nodded. "I'm from one of hundreds of worlds Naoko lived in. To me, she was Azuma Hatsumi, my adoptive onee-chan."

"This was what you were talking about when you told me about her, isn't it? All about the what-if worlds, and the places where the stories are true? You were trying to find a way to tell me about all of this."

"I told you the details were insane," Hazuki smiled softly.

"So who was she?" Tamao asked. "Naoko-sama, I mean. Who was she really?"

Leaving Youko's world where it was as well, Hazuki continued to lead the group amongst the endless shelves. "Her name is Eve. She and Lilith are the guardians of this library, which is… well, all of creation, or so I've been told."

"Eve and Lilith?" Kaname asked, speaking her first words in some time. "As in, Adam's wives? Garden of Eden? All that crap?"

"Seems too much to be a coincidence, doesn't it?" Chikaru nodded.

Hoping to nip a possible theological debate in the bud, Hazuki went on. "About ten thousand years ago, Eve started putting herself into these worlds, living in each one until she turned sixteen, and then leaving for another. Those of us who witness her departure from the world inherit a little piece of her power. When she left mine, though, I was able to follow her by hitching a ride with one of Lilith's servants, and then the three of us chased her through dozens of different worlds. Lilith wanted her to come back to her duties at the library, and I just… well, I just wanted her."

"Do you expect me to believe that Naoko-sama was Eve, from the Bible?" Kaname asked, a hint of her customary sneer returning.

"Not really," Hazuki shrugged. "But she's an immortal being named Eve who holds the power of creation inside her, so you tell me."

After fruitlessly searching the next two levels, Chikaru suggested that they split up, with Hazuki and Tamao checking one floor while Chikaru and Kaname took the next. Hazuki was a bit reluctant at first, but Chikaru assured her that it would be okay, and at any rate, it was apparent enough that Kaname was still too deeply shocked to be any real trouble.

Along the way they found more damaged books, and to Hazuki's growing disquiet, they were all recognized as worlds she had traveled. The once-damaged world in which she and Lilith had rescued the child Milka from a demoness trying to steal her *Souma* was once again ripped open. The book where she had defended Fujihime from the sparrow ninjas had its cover torn halfway off, and several pages were all but shredded. Both books were also spattered with blood.

The worst, though, was found a few levels up, where the book had actually been clawed into several pieces, with individual pages scattered around it. Hazuki felt sick inside as she tried to gather all the bloodied fragments and determine which it had been. All the

while, a slow anger began building as she thought of why this had been allowed to happen.

Tamao handed her a few of the loose pages. "If one of the books is… hurt this much, can it be repaired?"

"I don't know, Tamao-chan," Hazuki sighed, finally recognizing the symbols on the cover. "I hope so. This is the one where I met Chou'un."

"The master who taught you the naginata? Was she one of Eve's sisters, too?"

"No, she didn't have any *Souma* of her own, but there was someone else who did: a warrior named Ryofu. She was a simple, sweet girl, very fond of her dogs, and just happened to have the strength of an elephant." She smiled briefly at the memory. "She, Chou'un and I protected a city under siege by bandits, each of us wearing butterfly masks while we fought. It was wonderfully surreal."

Tamao smiled with Hazuki, then looked lost in thought for a moment. "Wait, Chou'un *and* Ryofu? Was this ancient China? *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* ?"

"Something like it, yes."

"But those were all men, weren't they?"

"Not in this world," Hazuki nodded. "I guess when you have this many books to choose from, anything's possible, really. Maybe there's even an Astraea filled with men after all."

Once they had gathered together as many pieces of this world as they could find, they continued along the endless stacks. "It's kind of funny," Tamao said at length. "Once you can think of a place like this as being real, it actually makes the stranger parts of your story make more sense."

"What do you mean?"

"It's just that your life seemed so… random," Tamao went on. "I used to wonder when you could possibly have had time to study with a wandering master, but if it wasn't in our world at all, the details can actually fit together."

"I suppose they can," Hazuki mused. "But it's still more than a little crazy."

After a long silence, Tamao asked the next question with obvious reluctance. "Hazuki-chan… why did you try to… I mean… why did you want to die? Was all of this just… too much?"

"No, no, Tamao-chan, not at all," Hazuki said softly. "That's the most insane detail of all. You see… in a way, it wasn't me who… *did* that."

Tamao's eyes went wide as she pieced it together. "It was the Hazuki who lived in *our* world?"

Hazuki stopped and leaned against one of the bookcases. "The Hazuki from your world never had a sister to heal her and take care of her, so she grew up lonely and sickly and not understanding why she wasn't like other girls. The first time you met me, I was still looking for Hatsumi, and I stayed less than a day, but when I came back the second time, I think somehow the book wrote me in at the exact moment the other Hazuki died, so that… I don't know, the *story* of Hazuki never actually ended. I had her memories, but my own healthy body. Later, Chikaru helped me get back the memories from my other life, the one with Hatsumi, so… now I'm both of us, really."

"But that's why you always say that it was *another* Hazuki who died," Tamao nodded slowly. She seemed a mix of amazed and relieved at this revelation.

"She's still with me," Hazuki whispered, "but most of the time the only way I can stay sane is to think of her as someone else, and try to learn from what she lived through."

Tamao set aside her naginata, slipped her arms around Hazuki's waist and held her tightly. Hazuki had to smile as she returned the embrace, holding this dear girl against her. Even in the midst of all this, Tamao still wanted to understand her, and even knowing now what she did, wanted to comfort her. Perhaps even in the midst of all this madness, there could still be hope for them after all.

The moment was interrupted, however, by Chikaru's voice echoing through the passage. "Hazuki-chan! Tamao-chan! Come up to the next level! We've found something!"

"You *do* have a gift for understatement…" Hazuki said in a small voice.

The first thing Hazuki noticed when they rejoined the others was a familiar floppy-brimmed black hat with two pointed crowns sitting on the stone-tile floor. It was hard to miss, given that it was encased in a small dome of shimmering green energy.

The second thing she noticed was the open book lying on the floor, in the center of a series of mystical sigils that appeared to have been painted in blood. This book, too, was damaged, with the open pages each torn halfway asunder.

The third thing she noticed was an ordinary-looking dining table which appeared to have been hastily converted into an altar, complete with still-burning black wax candles and a sacrificial dagger. Lying to either side of the bloodstained knife were the eviscerated corpses of Kogechibi and a similarly tiny Lilith dressed in librarian clothing and thick glasses. Aaya had mentioned that the Keepers had left aspects of themselves to guard the library in their stead, and here was the result of that foolishness.

The fourth thing she noticed was the nearby space of bare wall, cleared violently of its bookcases, upon which another huge mystic symbol had been painted, probably with the blood of the hapless guardians.

"… Because I'd say this very much qualifies as *something* ."

"Merciful God," Tamao whispered, making the sign of the cross over herself.

"I recognize the hat," Chikaru said, pointing vaguely toward it. "Lilith was wearing it the day you and I met."

"It's the hat of the Keeper," Hazuki nodded. "Eve was wearing it the last time I saw it. But… its eye is closed."

"At least the dragons didn't get to it," Chikaru noted.

"So what's with that book there?" Kaname asked, indicating the one in the center of the bloody scrawls.

Chikaru looked over at Hazuki. "I'll bet it's the one where our erstwhile Sisters have gone."

"Good, then let's get them out of there so we can go home and forget this ever happened," Kaname muttered.

"How are we going to get to it?" Tamao asked, looking nervously at the markings on the floor.

Kaname rolled her eyes, then strode across the mystic circle, picked up the book, and brought it back to the others. "Next question?"

Hazuki took the book from her, nodding thanks. In spite of herself, she was both amused and impressed with Kaname's boldness. "It's humming," she said, giving Tamao a little smile. "Maybe time's still moving in this one. What do you think, Chikaru?"

After placing one hand on it and closing her eyes, Chikaru nodded in agreement. "It doesn't feel like any of the others, damaged or otherwise. I'm pretty sure there's *Souma* in there."

Kaname crossed her arms. "Fine, then get us in there the way you got us here."

"I don't think I *did* get us here," Hazuki admitted. "Damn. Where's Aaya to explain everything when we need him?"

"Do you have to be a Keeper to go between worlds, then?" Chikaru asked.

Realization dawned, and Hazuki looked over at the small dome of green. "No, it was the hat," she said slowly. "The hat is where the power to travel actually came from."

She passed the book to Chikaru, then approached the barrier around the hat. It was guarded by *Souma*, no doubt, but the question was whose. Had someone protected *it*, or was it protecting *itself* ?

"If we can get to it, do you think one of us could use it to travel?"

"I'm not sure," Hazuki considered, holding one hand up to the translucent green shell. "Lilith used to say that only a Keeper can wear it. I think she was just worried I'd try to steal it and look for Hatsumi myself."

Gingerly, she placed the palm of her hand against the barrier. To her surprise, it collapsed at her touch, leaving the hat within reach. She looked back at the other three to steady herself, then carefully picked it up from the floor. It was surprisingly light for its size, but Hazuki could more than feel the power coursing through it, both like and very much unlike her own Souma. She turned it in her hands, looking for the huge blue eye at the base of the crown, but it remained closed, as though the hat were asleep.

"Here goes nothing," Hazuki breathed, then raised the brim over her head.

"Um, Hazuki-chan?" Tamao said quietly.

Hazuki looked back to see the other three were all looking at the floor where the hat had been. Hazuki looked down as well, and saw a small blob of scorched yellow feathers staring up at her.

"Ah, Hazuki-han!" it said in a weak voice. "I'd recognize those legs anywhere!"

Ken-chan had seen better days. The fat little parakeet was missing at least half of its feathers, and the bare skin beneath was blackened with soot, but Hazuki had seen the little yellow bun take a lot of punishment in the past and recover. Hopefully his resilience would not fail him this time.

They took him to a nearby kitchen on the same level ("Why do immortal guardians of the universe need a kitchen?" Kaname asked), then set him on a table to rest while the girls pulled up chairs. Hazuki set the still-sleeping hat down beside the bird, then gave him a gentle poke. "You look like shredded hell, Ken-chan."

"I met up with the wrong end of a dragon," Ken-chan moaned. "So much pain… But if one of you inestimable lovelies would do me the kindness of holding me to your bosom, I'm sure I can recover."

"Same old Ken-chan," Hazuki snorted. "What happened here?"

"It was terrible, Hazuki-han," the bird sighed. "I was hiding from those little pranksters the Keepers left behind, and then… *they* came."

"The dragons?" Chikaru asked.

"Yes, the followers of the Devourer."

The four girls exchanged glances. "The Devourer?" Hazuki repeated.

"We do not know his true name: just that even his followers call him the Devourer. One of the ancient enemies of creation. This library was built to hold out beasts like him."

"It's not doing its job, then," Kaname muttered.

"Ah, lady samurai-han, you are only half-right. The Devourer himself still cannot enter the library. Unfortunately for us, somehow he found a way to send his servants here. They killed the aspects of the Keepers and used their blood to force their way into the books. Their commander took most of them into the one where the Keepers are living out their mortal lives. The others were sent out to find the worlds containing bearers of *Souma*, then seek them out and kill them all, so that no one could stop their plans."

"The damaged books we found," Chikaru nodded. "Including our own."

"That dragon came specifically to kill the two of you?" Tamao whispered, looking pale at the very idea.

"There's something I still don't understand," Chikaru went on. "Ken-chan?"

"Yes, lovely dark sister of Eve?"

Chikaru blinked a couple of times at the colorful appellation. "If time stops when a book is damaged, why did we have to fight the dragon? Shouldn't they have just been able to tear a page, leave us frozen and move on?"

"In a normal world, yes," the bird sighed. "In a world containing one of Eve's kin, though, the world continues moving even when the damage is done. The bearer of the *Souma* must be killed to finish the job. I heard their commander telling them this as they scattered."

Hazuki's chest constricted painfully as the implications sunk in. "Youko, Ryofu, Milka… Fujihime… they're all dead, then. How? If *we* could stop that dragon, Ryofu at least should have been able to rip its head off."

"Remember the pain when the world opened, though, Hazuki-chan," Chikaru reminded her. "Maybe because the two of us were able to

share it, we could still fight back. The others might not have been able."

A slow, hot fury had already been stewing in Hazuki's guts as they'd stumbled across one sundered world after another. Now, at the news of all this carnage, all this death, she felt positively sickened. Had Milka ever had the chance to grow up? How many of Princess Fuji's samurai had died trying in vain to protect her? Was Chou'un trapped in mid-lunge somewhere in those shredded pages, trying to avenge the fallen Ryofu as the world froze around her?

All this so that the Keepers could have their holiday in a human world.

"One of them found me when it was looking for a world to invade," Ken-chan continued, "so I went to hide behind the Keeper's hat, but… the damned dragon burned me before I could reach safety."

"You did great, Ken-chan," Hazuki said quietly. "Leave the rest to us. I'll use the hat to take us into the book, we'll kill everything scaly we find, and we'll bring the Keepers back so they can do what they should have been doing and keep this Devourer out."

"Ahh, Hazuki-han!" Ken-chan squawked, flapping his tiny wings agitatedly. "Don't put on the hat, whatever you do! You're mortal!"

"Not as mortal as I used to be."

"It doesn't matter! That thing will eat you alive! Only the Keepers can generate the power it needs!"

"Generate?" Chikaru asked, frowning at the dormant headwear. "Is it like a parasite?"

"It feeds off the *Souma* of the one wearing it," Ken-chan explained. "I can smell the power on all of you, but none of you are even a *spark* compared to the Keepers. You can't do it!"

"We have to try!" Hazuki exploded. "Do you have any better ideas?"

The fat parakeet let out a long sigh. "Give me a chance to rest for a few minutes, and then I can take you."

"All of us?" Chikaru asked.

Another sigh. "Not even at my best. Two of you at the most. I can get you inside, but… I may not be able to get you out again. The world is torn, and I'm weak."

"You'll take me, then," Hazuki nodded. "I'll bring the hat, we'll find Eve and Lilith, and then one of them can get us back out again."

"Will that work, though?" Tamao asked. "You said they were living out mortal lives. Will they still have the power to use it?"

"Do you think Naoko was mortal, Tamao-chan?" Chikaru smiled, raising her eyebrows at the younger girl.

Hazuki gave a frustrated sigh, wishing she knew more of the answers. "Fine. If they can't use the hat, Eve heals Ken-chan, and he takes us out two by two. Would that work?"

"That *could* work," Ken-chan acknowledged. "Who else, then? I can take one more."

"How about me?"

As one, the other three girls turned to look at Kaname.

"I want to go home," Kaname said simply. "If we have to chop up a few more of those things to do it, then sign me up." She looked steadily at Hazuki. "You fought me. Tell me either of these two would be better."

"Kaname," Hazuki scowled.

"She's right, you know," Chikaru said quietly. "If they sent most of the dragons into that world, including their commander, perhaps we need both of our best swords to pursue them."

"But…" Hazuki started to protest. As much as Chikaru was making sense, the idea of leaving her behind did not sit well with Hazuki at all. Hadn't they devoted themselves these last few months to teaching one another so that they could see this through together?

At the same time, though, the thought of leaving Tamao behind with Kaname made her even more uncomfortable.

Chikaru reached across the table to take Hazuki's hand, sending her a comforting wave of energy. "Go on," she smiled. "And while the samurai is out to war, her wives will guard the home. With naginata, no less."

Hazuki arched her eyebrows. "This is *hardly* the best time for a marriage proposal, you know."

"Does no one appreciate a good metaphor anymore?" Chikaru sighed hugely, giving a red-faced Tamao a wink.

A few minutes later, they put the plan into action. Sword in one hand, hat in the other, and Ken-chan tucked happily into the tie of her uniform, Hazuki stood ready. Armed with sword and *o-yoroi*, Kaname stood beside her, and the book lay open at their feet.

Chikaru put her arms around Hazuki and held her tightly (both of them choosing to ignore a muffled comment from Ken-chan about being in the heavenly embrace of four perfect breasts), then gave her an electrically-charged kiss on the cheek. "Come back soon," she whispered.

"I have everything to come back for," Hazuki smiled.

Tamao was next, taking Hazuki's face in both hands and kissing her deeply. "There's a lot that I still need to know," she smiled faintly. "Don't keep me waiting."

Hazuki held the girl to her, one hand around her waist and the other touching the back of her neck, allowing their *Souma* to mingle. "I won't. There's so much more now that I can't wait to show you."

From the corner of her eye, Hazuki saw Chikaru put both of her hands on Kaname's face, much as Tamao had just done to Hazuki herself, and for a bizarre moment, it looked as though Chikaru might kiss her. But instead, to Hazuki's profound relief, she merely smiled. "Remember what I told you, Kaname-san."

Kaname nodded wordlessly and closed her eyes for a moment, her face almost contemplative beneath Chikaru's touch.

"Warm goodbyes all finished?" Ken-chan asked from the vicinity of Hazuki's cleavage. "Hold onto your sculpted muscular backsides then, ladies! We're off!"

There was a flash, a feeling of being pulled, and they were gone.

Even as the figures of Hazuki and Kaname transformed into green light and poured into the open pages, there came a leathery *thump*, and when the glow faded, Chikaru's heart sank as she saw the hat of the Keeper lying on the floor next to where Hazuki had been standing.

"Oh… hell," she whispered.

Tamao looked from the hat to Chikaru. "What do we do now?" she asked in a worried voice.

"We wait," Chikaru sighed. "They still have Ken-chan. If they take too long… I guess we'll have to think of something, won't we?"

Next: Dragons

Dragons

AUTHOR'S NOTE: "Dragons? In *my* Shoujo-ai?" It's more likely than you think…

Now you ask me why I'm here

Same as you, I'm scared: it's fear

I've become the beggar now

And you've become the saint somehow

Twist the words and place the blame

But tell me now, aren't we the same?

Tripping in our yellow feet

Checking underneath our sheets, for some hope

Give me hope, that emptiness brings fullness

And loss of love brings wholeness to us all

-Indigo Girls

.

Whirlwind life of faith and betrayal

Rise in anger, fall back and repeat

Slow degrees on the dark horizon

Full moon rising, lays silver at your feet

It's a far cry from the world we thought we'd inherit

-Rush

Part 19: Dragons

"Lesbian sex?"

Tamao looked over her shoulder to see Chikaru offering her a cup and saucer. She gratefully accepted it, then took a long whiff of the steaming liquid inside. "I haven't been able to look at tea the same way since the first time you made that joke."

"Then I've done my work well," Chikaru smiled happily, settling to the floor beside Tamao, a cup of her own in hand. "For being the immortal angelic guardians of all creation, the Keepers really seem to love their tea. I had to go through ten full cabinets of the stuff in that kitchen before I could find something I recognized. I suppose it must be one of the perks of the job, being able to get all the best flavors in creation."

"I suppose it must," Tamao nodded absently, her eyes drawn back to the book that sat a few feet in front of them.

"I'm sure they're fine," Chikaru assured the younger girl. "Those dragons won't know what hit them."

"I hope so," Tamao sighed.

Chikaru studied her pensive expression for a while longer, then let out a sigh of her own. "You'll have to forgive me, Tamao-chan, if I'm not quite my normal creepily insightful self after the morning we've had. I'll need you to help me out with specifics: what else is bothering you?"

"That's just it, Chikaru. You *are* your normal self, in spite of *all* of this. You act like none of this surprises you at all."

"Tamao, darling, when I was not quite fourteen years old, I saw my older sister, whom I'd adored and admired all my life, turn into a beam of green light and ascend into the heavens. It takes a lot to shock me after that."

"Do you really think she's… an angel?" Tamao asked with a soft frown.

"Mmm, angels don't have to be little naked babies with wings, I don't think. Does it bother you to think she might be?"

"It's more than that," Tamao admitted. "I mean, look around us. Don't get me wrong, there's something very satisfying about the idea of Heaven being some sort of library, but… today I've seen a dragon, and worlds inside books, and a perverted talking parakeet, and…" she waved her hand in the direction of the arcane sigils and unfortunate guardians. "And Eve and Lilith, no less? What does that mean? I've never been the best little Catholic girl in the world--"

"I imagine that whole lesbian thing puts you at odds, yes," Chikaru nodded with a tiny smile to show that she was mostly kidding.

"But what does this place tell us? Is everything we learned from the Sisters a lie, then? Have we got it all wrong?"

"Ah, a crisis of faith," said Chikaru. "Not my specialty, but I'll see what I can do for you."

"Chikaru…"

"No, really," Chikaru went on, holding up her free hand to forestall any further protest. "Now, I'm not a priestess -- at least not of any religion you'd want to be a part of, seeing as it has this increasingly aggravating celibacy issue -- but I don't see why *anything* has to be a lie, even sitting here with you in this place between worlds, drinking

tea raided from the Lost Kitchen Of The Gods, while we wait for two of our schoolmates to come back from slaying dragons."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean, Tamao, is that you're a writer and a poet. Metaphor is one of your tools. Can't *everything* be true once you view it through the lens of metaphor?"

Tamao furrowed her brow as she thought about this, but it was hard to follow along, as she was finding herself stuck on something Chikaru had said earlier. Celibacy issue?

"Also, consider this," Chikaru continued. "Ours are mortal minds trying to understand the divine, just as people have been doing all through the ages. You've heard the stories of a grand kingdom in the clouds, where God is sitting at a throne with his son at his right hand. That was a very timely metaphor back when those words were written. By the same token, perhaps this library is *our* way of putting the impossibilities of creation in a framework that *we* can understand. You yourself said that the idea of Heaven as a library was an attractive one. Maybe this is simply our way of comprehending the seen and the unseen without our poor human brains leaking out through our ears."

"I already feel like they are," Tamao sighed. "I wish I could be as calm about this as you are."

"Perhaps, but I've had a bit more practice. I've had this wellspring of energy inside me for more than three years now, even if I didn't truly know what it was until I met Hazuki."

"And now I have it too," Tamao said quietly. "What does… what does that make me?"

When there was no answer forthcoming, Tamao looked up to see Chikaru gazing at her very intently. "It makes you very lucky, Tamao-chan," she said in a low voice that managed to be reassuring,

mysterious and undeniably sad all at the same time. "You see, now you'll be able to…"

Another long silence ensued, and then Chikaru set aside her tea, scooted to face Tamao, and exhaled briskly. "Here's a way to pass some time, if you'd like: a few lessons in Beginner-Level Meditation With *Souma*, taught by Minamoto-sensei. Are you game?"

Skeptical at Chikaru's sudden turn of mood, but undeniably curious about this new feeling inside her, Tamao nodded, set aside her own cup, and turned to mirror the other girl's pose. "Thank you, Chikaru. And yes, I'd love to learn more."

"Good. You're three months behind Hazuki-chan, and the sooner you can catch up, the happier I'm sure you'll both be…"

Hazuki and Kaname materialized in a shimmer of green, finding themselves standing back-to-back in a setting that they both found disorienting in its familiarity.

"Didn't we just leave here?" Kaname asked.

Indeed, Ken-chan had dropped them right in the middle of one of St. Spica's equestrian ranges. "Oh, Hatsumi," Hazuki said under her breath. "Another Astraea?" It was then that she noticed her empty hand, and she swore loudly. "Damn it, the hat didn't come with us!"

"How's the bird?"

Hazuki fished a rigid Ken-chan out of her shirt, finding him at the very least unconscious. She stuffed him into her skirt pocket and shook her head. "Not good."

A quick look around revealed notable differences between this world and the one they'd left. The color of the leaves and the slight chill in the late-afternoon air marked the season as autumn, as opposed to the hot summer day they had departed. And while there was indeed

a crack in the sky, it was actually quite small compared to the one in their own world.

Another key difference quickly made itself known as a dragon emerged from the shattered stable doors, dragging the bloodied body of a riding horse in its jaws. Upon seeing the two girls, it dropped its prize, roared, and charged them.

Hazuki and Kaname glanced toward one another, nodded in unison, and struck. They streaked past the snapping jaws, Hazuki breaking left while Kaname broke right, and in unison brought their swords across the dragon's shoulders, ripping into the joints where the wings connected to the back. As the dragon reared up, screeching in pain, Kaname vaulted up on top of it, stuck the tip of her blade between two scales right where the neck connected to the shoulders, and drove it to the hilt, even as Hazuki buried her own weapon into the thing's chest, close to where she'd hit the previous one. Both of them leaped clear as the beast began to flail wildly for a moment before collapsing in a twitching heap.

"I was never this fast," Kaname said in a stunned whisper as she tried to wipe the blood from her blade.

"Get used to it. I have the feeling we're going to need all that speed and more."

"So where do we go now?"

Hazuki tried to clear her head, as Chikaru had instructed her over these past months, and allow her *Souma* to reach out to the world around her, seeking others like herself. She'd done this unconsciously during her original journey, following gut feelings that were really the first manifestations of her inner senses, but this time she was counting on these abilities to guide her.

Finally, in the distance, she felt the "scent" of Eve's power. She turned to face the far-off trace of it, not surprised at all when she

realized the direction from which it was coming. "The dormitory," she nodded. "Someone with *Souma* is there."

They took off running, leaving their first victim to ooze onto the turf. It was a fair distance from Spica to Strawberry Hall, but they took it at a hard sprint.

"This is your secret, isn't it?" Kaname asked as they pelted down the familiar pathways. "Your recovery, your skill, your strength… no wonder you're so good. You've got this… *thing* inside you."

"That's right, and now so do you. And you'd damn well better be careful how you use it."

"I'll tell you one thing: when we get home, we're *definitely* sparring again."

"I'll be glad to," Hazuki half-grinned. "Because that means we'll be home."

After a few more steps, Kaname gave her an odd look. "This is why you let yourself get dropped from the team, isn't it?"

Hazuki looked back, holding her eyes as much as she could while running full-tilt. "Are you telling me you wouldn't have done the same?"

Kaname appeared puzzled for a moment, then scowled and looked away. "Screw you."

"You could at least offer to buy me a drink first."

As they passed St. Spica proper, Hazuki tried very hard to ignore the distant screams, the smoke rising from the main building, the pools of blood, and the smell of something charred that was probably not simply wood or plaster. Nothing was more important now than finding Eve and Lilith, and putting an end to this nightmare. And if the

Keepers couldn't put this right, Hazuki would scour the worlds until she found someone who could.

However, at the sight of another dragon messily chewing at what had once been a Spican student, Hazuki could not allow herself to simply run past. " *HEY!"* she called as she dashed forward, sword at the ready.

The dragon looked up with a grunt of surprise only to have its skull cleaved from top to bottom by Hazuki's crescent-moon sword, even as Kaname again jammed hers all the way to the hilt, this time in the monster's side. It was dead before it hit the ground.

Hazuki wanted to move on, having avenged whoever this had been, but she found her eyes drawn to the mangled body. Part of her wanted to see the girl's face, so she could add the image to her mounting fury at the sheer irresponsibility of the so-called Keepers. While most of the body was a bloodied mess, the face was by and large intact, and Hazuki's eyes went wide as she recognized it.

"Who did it get?" Kaname asked in a constricted voice as she came up behind Hazuki.

"Stay back," Hazuki said quietly, holding her arm out to block Kaname's advance.

"Let me see, damn it, who--?"

Hazuki watched Kaname as her eyes became large and distant behind her samurai mask, and as much as Hazuki had learned to dislike this woman standing beside her, she could not feel anything but pity as the Spica president stared down into her own dead eyes.

The sword slipped from Kaname's numb fingers as she dropped to her knees beside the half-eaten corpse of this world's Kenjyo Kaname, and for a long time, she stared unblinking at that face, its features twisted into a final mask of terror and pain.

"It's not you," Hazuki said at last.

"Who the hell else could it be?" Kaname replied, her voice thick and choked.

"It's not you, Kaname, because you're *here*, and you're *alive*, and I *need* you." Hazuki knelt beside her oft-time nemesis and took her by the shoulders, forcing her to face away from the grisly sight. "We can put a stop to this, but we need to *go*, Kaname. Are you coming with me?"

There were tears behind that samurai mask now, but after staring into Hazuki's eyes for a moment, Kaname gave a quick nod, grabbed her sword, and got back to her feet. Hazuki bent to close the other Kaname's eyes, then stood as well, taking her companion by the arm and leading her away. "Let's go. You'll be okay, I promise."

"I'm going," Kaname growled, making an obvious effort to cover her shock with anger. "And that's easy for you to say. Have *you* ever seen your own dead body before, world traveler?"

"No, but I've *been* my own dead body."

They picked up the pace to a trot, then a run, and resumed their path toward the distant Strawberry Hall.

Hikari peeked out from the hedges to see one of the dragons pacing slowly in front of the main entrance to the dormitory. That was every one of the outward-facing doors guarded by these horrible, nightmarish beasts, and panic tightened its grip on her heart.

Her companions seemed little better off. Kizuna and Remon were holding one another's hands so tightly that it appeared painful, Tsubomi was shaking even as she tried to keep up a brave face, and poor Chiyo's eyes seemed to be twin seas of white around tiny dark irises and dilated pupils.

"Why can't they get into the dorm?" Tsubomi whispered. "They were able to rip the doors and windows out of Spica easily enough."

"I don't know," Remon hissed back. "But there must be a reason, right? Maybe they have to be invited in?"

"That's vampires, not dragons," Kizuna corrected her.

"Well whatever it is, if they can't get in, then that's where we need to get to," Remon shot back at her roommate. "There's got to be a way to sneak past."

Tsubomi straightened up, chewed her lower lip for a moment, then nodded to herself. "I have an idea. You guys run for the door when you hear the signal."

"What signal?" Kizuna asked.

Hikari's eyes widened as Tsubomi first turned to her, then lunged forward to give the older girl a clumsy but intense kiss. "Sorry, Hikari-onee-sama," she whispered as she broke away. "You wouldn't have said yes if I'd asked."

She then looked back at the other three and nodded once. "The signal is me screaming," she told them, then leaped up and sprinted from cover, straight toward the dragon.

"Tsubomi, come back!" Kizuna shrieked.

As they watched in horror, Tsubomi ran up behind the dragon, scooped up a rock from the ground, and hurled it at the scaly monstrosity. "Come and get me, lizard breath!" she shouted at it, then turned and ran off in another direction, away from the doors.

"She'll be killed!" Chiyo squeaked.

Remon yanked a stunned Hikari to her feet. "We need to go! Come on!"

The dragon loped lazily after Tsubomi as she tried to lead it further from the doors. Hikari was forcibly reminded of a cat toying with a mouse, and even as Remon was all but pulling her arm from its socket as she dragged her toward the dormitory, there was a moment in which she wanted desperately to come to this insanely brave girl's aid somehow.

But then there was a scream from Remon, followed quickly by a rush of wind and the white-hot pain of claws tearing into her back. None of them had known that there had been another dragon nearby. Hikari fell to the ground, hurting too deeply to even cry out as a rough claw rolled her over onto her lacerated back and then pressed down.

Then, with Hikari pinned under one claw and Remon under the other, the dragon lowered its head and licked at them with its forked tongue. It looked from one girl to the other, as though deciding which of them to eat first. Eventually, having apparently made up its mind, it opened its toothy maw and closed in toward Hikari for the kill. The young Spican closed her eyes against the hellish vision and waited for the end to come.

But then there was a loud " *Kyai!* " followed by a metallic whistling sound, and something heavy landed on Hikari, further knocking the wind from her. She opened her eyes to see the dragon's severed head rolling off of her chest, its blood spilling over her uniform.

The last thing she saw before shock and pain took her consciousness was an honest-to-God samurai warrior standing over her and extending a hand. " *Come on, Hikari! Get up!"*

"If this is what it feels like, no wonder you and Hazuki are always touching one another."

"I did warn you that our relationship had its sensuous side, Tamao-chan."

"I see what you mean. Is it wrong of me to be… um… *enjoying* all of this as much as I am?"

"Not *wrong* as such, but… there's a subtle difference between sensuous and sensual, and I think you might be blurring the line a little. Stay with me, now."

"Yes, please."

"I mean stay focused," Chikaru laughed, but by then it was too late, and Tamao opened her eyes, the meditative trance between them broken.

"I'm sorry," Tamao sighed. "You're trying to help me, and my mind won't behave."

"It's a lot to take in, those first times," Chikaru admitted. "When Hazuki-chan and I first shared our *Souma*, she was focused on someone else, and I was… well, I was *me*, so it felt more like a sisterly bond than anything else. You, on the other hand, have a certain predisposition toward me that's tripping you up, and you'd be better served saving that for when Hazuki-chan gets back."

Tamao studied Chikaru's face for a few moments, then finally asked the question that had refused to leave her mind. "Chikaru… why are you celibate?"

Chikaru grimaced. "I was hoping you'd have missed that little slip. I suppose I should have known better."

"You told me once that there would be plenty of time for you to fall in love later. You didn't really mean that at all, did you? Why can't you?"

After taking a deep breath and letting it out in a thoughtful sigh, Chikaru looked toward the book containing the missing third of their circle. "To be honest, Tamao-chan, I'm not sure I know anymore." She then made a business of shaking off her pensive thoughts. "Anyway, what's important is that you and Hazuki-chan have the

chance to share something incredible now. Bonds of love that poets through the ages have only dreamed of. You'll be able to share *everything*, for all your long lives together. You can be her soul-sister in *every* way."

Even though Chikaru was smiling fondly as she said this, Tamao found the words deeply unsettling. "Why does that sound like a prelude to goodbye, Chikaru?"

Chikaru closed her eyes and sighed again. "Tamao-chan, I…"

"It wouldn't be everything," Tamao whispered. "Not if you weren't there."

All at once, the conflicted expression on Chikaru's face stiffened, and she held up one hand, as if in warning. "Do you hear something?"

It took some effort to roll the fallen dragon's bulk off of Tsubomi's legs, but eventually Hazuki was able to pull the girl free. She was still breathing, though her pulse was thready and uneven, and at the very least both of her legs were probably shattered from the knee down. As fast as Hazuki had been, it hadn't quite been enough.

While she was reluctant to move her, there didn't seem to be much alternative, so Hazuki carefully scooped the unconscious girl up in her arms and carried her as quickly as she could toward the dormitory. Outside the front doors, Kaname had just managed to pry a bloodied blonde girl from the claws of a beheaded dragon, and was now working on a similarly pinned girl whose green hair made her easy to identify as Remon.

"How's the pipsqueak?" Kaname called.

"Not good," Hazuki said with a shake of her head, then did a double-take as she recognized the first girl Kaname had rescued as Hikari. "Did you just save Hikari? Irony rears its head again."

"You can just shut your mouth about that," Kaname snapped as she pulled Remon out from under the massive talons. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Actually, I do. She told me about it herself."

"Oh, did she? Huh. Being Etoile's given her some spine after all."

"You should be thankful for that spine," Hazuki snorted. "She's the one who convinced me not to toss you out of a tall building when I found out."

"Are they still alive?" came a third voice suddenly. Hazuki looked to see a dark-haired Miatoran girl she did not recognize hurrying toward them from the now-open front doors. Behind those doors stood a shell-shocked Kizuna holding a trembling Chiyo, and Hazuki breathed a momentary sigh of relief. She'd lost sight of those two as she'd gone chasing Tsubomi's dragon, and it was good to know they had reached relative safety.

"They're all hurt badly," Kaname said, turning to face the newcomer, but then she stopped short at the sight of her.

The black-haired girl looked from the armored samurai to the sword-bearing valkyrie in sailor- *fuku* and narrowed her eyes. "Who are you?"

"It's a long story," Hazuki said. "We're here to help, though. Can I talk to your Etoile?"

"I *am* the Etoile," the Miatoran girl frowned. "I ask again, who are you?"

Kaname pulled off her helmet and faced off with the girl. "Sa-Sakuragi-sama, can it wait until we're inside?"

The name clicked in Hazuki's memory, and her eyes widened as she took in the sight of this girl, so visibly different from the one in the

picture on Chikaru's headboard. *This* was Sakuragi Kaori?

"Kenjyo-san," Kaori gasped, but then she quickly shook off her surprise. "I'll take Natsume-san. Follow me."

With very little effort, Kaori picked up Remon, then hurried for the doors, followed by Kaname and Hazuki bearing Hikari and Tsubomi. She led them down into the expansive storage basement, which had been converted into a makeshift triage area. Once inside, the Etoile directed them to a row of bare mattresses spread out to one side, and they gently set the three injured girls down next to several others in various states of consciousness.

Hazuki took a long, slow look around the room, which was filled with girls of all three schools, some sitting against the walls, eyes huge and unblinking, hugging their knees to themselves, while others clung to one another, weeping at the horrors they'd no doubt witnessed. A few hardier souls were tending to the injured, including Sister Mizue herself.

Kaname, who had put her helmet back on by this time, edged closer to Hazuki and spoke to her in a low voice. "In case you're interested, this doesn't appear to be our *time* . Over there, the blonde with the gash on her ridiculously huge forehead?"

"Where?" Hazuki gasped, whirling around to look for Hatsumi. The girl Kaname indicated was unfamiliar to her, however.

"That's Shion. She was Spica's president before me. And I think that's Miyuki over there. Between them and the pipsqueak, this must be a year ago."

"It's still not our world," Hazuki reminded her, but she was finding it harder and harder to distance herself from the devastated looks on these faces she'd seen so often in the past happy months.

Once Remon was settled, Kaori found herself being roughly embraced by another tall Miatoran, this one with black hair in a short

braid. "You went out again? Damn it, Kaori-chan, stop tempting fate!"

"It's okay, Miyuki. It seems we have some dragon-slayers among us." Kaori looked from Miyuki to Hazuki. "So would our mysterious guest care to tell us what the hell is going on here?"

"Go ahead," Kaname nodded to Hazuki. "You know this lunacy better than I do. I'll help down here."

"Is there somewhere we can talk away from the others?" Hazuki asked.

"Upstairs," Miyuki nodded, then led the way, beckoning the other two to follow.

Kaname took off her gauntlets, then picked up one of the towels she'd been given and dunked it in a nearby basin of warm water. The back of Hikari's uniform was all but torn away, but this at least made it easier to start cleaning the deep gashes she'd sustained. The wounds were bad enough without the dirt and grass caked over them, so Kaname carefully but deliberately scrubbed the mess away, allowing the blood to flow cleanly again before applying gauze pads and taping them down.

This made up for nothing, of course, and she knew that as well as anyone -- this wasn't even "her" Hikari -- but in a strange way, it made her feel a little better. She briefly lay her hand over the girl's ribs, feeling them rise and fall with her shaky breath.

Once satisfied that Hikari would be okay, at least as much as she could be, Kaname gave a heavy sigh and stood. For a moment, she wondered what to do next, as both Tsubomi and Remon were now being attended to, but then she noticed that someone was staring at her from across the room. Somebody all too familiar, even in this hellish context.

Standing shakily, her huge eyes red with tears, Momomi let out a strangled sob and launched herself across the room at Kaname, almost knocking her over in a desperate embrace. "Oh God, oh God, oh God, Kaname?!"

"Momomi," Kaname whispered, holding the trembling girl against her.

"But you… you *died*, I saw you, I… I saw that thing k--" Momomi took a shuddering breath and went on. "You pushed me out of its way, and it… oh, God, I saw it tear you apart, and I ran, and… Oh, God, how can you *be* here? I saw you *die!* "

"Ssh," Kaname whispered, tightening her grip and rocking Momomi just slightly in her arms. "I'm just… glad you're safe."

Momomi pushed herself away slightly, looking up and down at Kaname's unfamiliar armor. "You came back," she whispered. "Are you… are you an angel?"

Smiling wryly behind her mask, Kaname pulled her closer again. "You know me better than that, my love. But… I think I might be fighting on their side this time."

Moments later, Hazuki, Kaori and Miyuki were in the abandoned council chambers on the ground floor. Hazuki's mind was quickly filling with questions based on what little she knew about these two women and their history, but now was not the time. She could not allow herself to get sucked into this world, not while the Keepers were still beyond her reach.

One thing was certain, though. This Kaori was obviously not the sickly, frail thing that had been Shizuma's lover and fellow Etoile before her tragically early death. There was something deeply familiar about this girl, and Hazuki had the feeling she knew what it was.

"Talk to us," Kaori said in a businesslike voice. "The sky cracked open this morning, monsters from Hell are taking our school and our girls apart, and now you and Kenjyo-san are here lopping heads with swords, in spite of the fact that I've had three different people tell me that she was killed. What do you know about all this?"

"Etoile-sama, I don't have time to get into the details, but…" Hazuki held out her hand. "Just… take my hand, please?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Miyuki protested.

Kaori, however, reached out to grasp Hazuki's outstretched hand, and as they touched, Hazuki once again felt that familiar push and pull of energy. She had found her source of *Souma* . It was a tiny seed, just as her own had once been, but it was very real.

"Who are you?" Kaori asked quietly, obviously having felt the jolt between them as well.

"I'm looking for two girls," Hazuki said steadily. "One has curly blonde hair and violet eyes, the other has reddish-brown eyes and straight blonde hair, usually clipped with red bows."

Miyuki and Kaori exchanged looks of shock, then Kaori turned those stunned eyes on Hazuki. "You know my sisters?"

Hazuki nodded, almost amused at how this all made sense. Kaori was another of Eve's mortal sisters, and like Hazuki, had been saved from her wasting illness by the wayward Keeper. "Yes, I do. I need to find them; can you tell me where they are?"

"They're gone," Kaori said in a stony voice. "I watched those monsters carry both of them away, right before my eyes."

With those words, Hazuki practically felt the world fall out from beneath her. Was she already too late? "Do you know where they were taken?"

"If I knew, I'd *be* there," Kaori snapped. "What the hell kind of question is that?"

"I'm sorry, Etoile-sama, it's just that--" Hazuki rubbed a hand over her face and tried to think. "Which direction did they go? Were the dragons carrying off any other girls, or just them?"

Kaori all but exploded. "Who *are* you? Why are you asking me these things?"

"I'm trying to save their lives!" Hazuki shouted back. "And probably everyone else's too! Can you answer the damned questions?"

Miyuki put a hand on Kaori's shoulder to stop another outburst. "West," the taller girl said. "They flew West. And now that you say it, I don't think I saw them carrying off anyone else. The other ones seemed happy enough to just… kill us on the ground." She shivered, obviously at recent memory.

"Thank you," Hazuki nodded. "I'm sorry, Etoile-sama, I wish I could tell you everything, but… there just isn't time. We have to go find them."

"Wait," said Kaori. "If you're going after them, I want to come with you."

Hazuki looked into the young Etoile's eyes for a moment. On the one hand, she had once been in this very position, wanting desperately to follow Hatsumi into whatever world had taken her, but she had the feeling there were other mitigating circumstances here. "Kaori-sama," she said, intentionally using the name of hew newest long-lost sister from another world, "there's a reason why the dragons outside haven't turned this building to a pile of ash, and honestly, I think it's you." She again reached for the girl's hand, then sent a wave of *Souma* echoing between them. "Whether you know it or not, I think you've been protecting everyone here all this time. Let me do this. I'll save your sisters or die trying, and you have my word on that."

Kaori stared back defiantly for a few moments, but then Miyuki put her arms around the smaller girl from behind and leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. "I don't know what she's saying, Kaori-chan, but we *are* needed here, as Etoile. And… I can't lose you too, my love."

"Fine," Kaori sighed. "But there are still three or four dragons right outside our doors. You seem pretty good at this, samurai-girl: do you think you could do something about them on your way out?"

Ninety minutes and four dead lizards later, Hazuki was busily ripping into the steering column of an older pickup truck in the parking lot outside St. Spica while Kaname kept watch. "So you know how to hot-wire a car, eh?" the older girl smirked. "I thought *I* was the bad girl here."

"You pick up a few things while world-hopping," Hazuki grunted as she ripped out the ignition assembly. "I can hot-wire a car, shoot a machine gun, set a separated shoulder, and cook a wicked menma. Drove a tank once, too."

"Fine, fine, I'm just going to stand here being amused that you and I are actually stealing Kojima-sensei's truck."

"It's the only one old enough that I think I can manage it," Hazuki admitted. "The newer security systems are a pain in the ass. Besides, neither of our alternate Etoile had any leads on something we could legitimately borrow."

Kaname gazed down toward the city at the base of the hill. "Things are going to be bad out there, aren't they?"

"What do you mean?" Hazuki asked, looking up from under the steering wheel.

In response, Kaname simply pointed upward. Night had fallen, but the newly risen moon was shining brightly enough to outline the rift of sheer black overhead. "A lot of people are going to think the

apocalypse is here. We might have a little bit of trouble getting around once we're off this hill."

The motor revved to life, and Hazuki scooted over to the passenger's side. "Well, that'll be your lookout, since you're driving."

"Wait, *I'm* driving?"

"What, you don't know how to drive a stick?"

Kaname frowned. "No, I'm just wearing freaking samurai armor, you twit."

"Let me put it to you this way," Hazuki said, leaning out of the open door. "Unless you think *you* can meditate your way into enough of a trance to pick up the scent of their *Souma*, *you're* driving."

With a frustrated sigh, Kaname shifted the driver's seat as far back as she could, took off her helmet and tossed it into the extended cab area, then clambered in. "You're enjoying all of this, aren't you?" she growled as she fumbled for the seat belt for a while until Hazuki reached over to fasten it for her.

"Other than the fact that the supernatural being I used to be madly in love with has sent reality spinning out of control and caused the deaths of several of my friends and God only knows how many more? Oh, and all of creation is threatened by some cosmic beastie called The Devourer? Sure, I'm having a blast; thanks for asking."

"So where are we going, anyway?"

"West," Hazuki said, simply.

"Lovely," Kaname sighed, shifting the truck into gear and getting started.

"What did you tell Momomi on the way out?" Hazuki asked as they began to drive the long road down from the hill.

"That I needed to go save the world."

"Good. So long as you didn't say anything *too* dramatic."

After a pause, Kaname spoke again, this time with apparent difficulty. "I didn't ask her to join you, you know."

"Who?"

Kaname looked over at Hazuki, several emotions vying for control over her face. "Momomi. I didn't ask her to join your naginata team. She did that on her own. I… just wanted you to know that."

"Well, thank you; I'm glad to hear that. She's… making progress."

"In other words, she's terrible at it?" Kaname asked with a knowing grin.

"I wouldn't say terrible. Just… making progress."

"Fine, be that way," Kaname laughed. She then looked over at Hazuki again and frowned. "Did one of the dragons nick you? You've got a gash on your forehead, left side."

Hazuki narrowed her eyes at the other girl, wondering if this was supposed to be funny. "No, that came when someone cheap-shotted me with a bokken while I was obviously experiencing incapacitating pain due to the world ripping open."

Kaname quickly looked away. "I was already into my swing," she muttered.

"Of course you were."

Chikaru slowly rose and retrieved her naginata from where she'd left it leaning against the railing around the atrium. Tamao followed, staying close to her. "What is it?" Tamao whispered.

"Something's… humming," Chikaru whispered back. "Can you hear it?"

Tamao tried to listen for it, but all she could hear at first was the ever-present ticking of some distant clock. Then, just at the lower ranges of audible, she began to hear it: a low vibration that seemed to shake the stone tiles beneath their feet. It grew in intensity, until their abandoned teacups began to bounce in their saucers.

"I think we may have a problem," Chikaru said in a tiny voice. Following her stunned gaze, Tamao quickly saw why.

The mystic symbols painted on the wall near where the book had originally been lying were beginning to pulse with energy, and the wall itself became difficult to focus on, almost as though it were caught between existing and not.

With a scraping sound of leather against stone, the book containing Hazuki, Kaname and the missing Sisters slid across the floor to once again take its place in the center of the second arcane circle. These symbols, too, began to glow, filling the area with a sickly yellow light.

Then, with a low grumbling roar, something began to emerge from the haze where the wall had been. First a scaly red muzzle filled with terrible teeth, each at least two meters in length. Then a face fringed with a halo of what seemed like living fire. Next, a pair of horrible orange eyes, with black slit-pupils like those of a cat, lit up from within with a pulsing, almost hateful glow. A serpentine neck followed, and then two tremendous claws as the beast tried to squeeze into this reality from its own.

As Tamao's mind began to spin wildly with sheer terror, she knew beyond a doubt that she was looking at the King of Dragons. This was the Devourer.

"Run," Chikaru whispered.

Next: Sacrifice

Sacrifice

I am an only child, born of the wild

Riddled to spend my time defending my land

You are the only one, born in the sun

Riddled to spend your time defending my plan

And it's one more life for the taker

One more song for the maker

-Indigo Girls

Keep going until dawn

How many times must another line be drawn?

We may be down and gone

But we hold on

-Rush

Part 20: Sacrifice

" ***Your spell has been successful, Mistress,"*** the dragon hissed. " ***Our strongest wyrms sense that Our Lord has been drawn closer to this world. But there is trouble. Those of our flock who remained behind to guard the Souma-bearer have been slaughtered."***

The demoness stopped her pacing before the altar and turned to face the draconic messenger. "How? The Sakuragi girl may indeed have power, but she is untrained. She could scarcely have slain them all."

" ***If you had allowed us to kill the child, Mistress…"***

"No!" snapped the demoness. "If this world's Souma-bearer dies, we fail."

The messenger let out another long hiss, then his next words came in a low growl. " ***The dying thoughts of our guards told us of two women, strong in their Souma, slaying our kin with speed and steel. If the child has managed to summon aid, when she could have been silenced, Our Lord will not be pleased."***

"He would be far less pleased to be trapped here for eternity the moment he takes the sacrifice! Without Sakuragi, time will stop when the Keepers are slain, and then you, I and Your Lord will be a frozen picture on a page in an empty library! And if two more *Souma* - bearers have indeed come, beast, would that not be the fault of your assassins for failing to slay them within their own worlds? Your Lord bragged of the invincibility of his advance troops. Such a shame to learn they might have been bested by two mortals, hmm?"

A laugh came from nearby. "You'd better hope Hazuki-chan isn't one of them," a defiant voice spat, "or it'll be your head on one of those blades."

She looked down at the trussed-up figure, whose arms and legs were bound by glowing ropes, with blood staining her black school uniform. The prisoner's face was pale from the blood she'd lost in the first part of the ritual, but her violet eyes were still gleaming with fury and satisfaction. With an almost bored sigh, the demoness kicked Lilith in the stomach, causing the elder Keeper to cough and retch where she lay.

"Honestly, Lilith, I may need to keep you alive for the final sacrifice, but don't think for one moment that I won't happily spend the remaining hours torturing you exquisitely if you don't *shut* your *foolish mouth!* " Each accented word was delivered with another sharp kick, sending Lilith rolling down the steps from the altar, leaving a trail of blood from her many wounds.

" ***Mistress!"*** the dragon hissed.

"Send your warriors to track down these *Souma* -bearers and kill them," the demoness said with a dismissive wave, "or at the very least delay them until dawn. Go."

With a final snort of smoke and brimstone, the dragon slunk away to relay the order.

"Seiren," a soft voice called.

The demoness turned to the young woman tied to the altar and scowled. "Save your breath, Eve; you don't have many left. Don't waste them with pleading."

"I don't intend to plead," Eve replied, her voice almost conversational. "I merely wish to apologize to you."

"Apologize?"

"Indeed. For you see, the suffering that drove you to make this pact with the Devourer is all my fault."

Seiren peered closely at the young Keeper. "It was your wretched sister who created me and then abandoned me without a purpose."

"And it was my fault that Lilith took that action. She created you out of loneliness, which was borne of my absence. And when I reunited Gargantua and Ritsuko, I left you without a master to serve. The blame is all mine."

"It matters not whose fault it was," Seiren smiled. "Both of you will die for it."

"As will you," Eve nodded. "Surely you don't believe the Devourer will do anything but slay you when your work is done? He exists only to destroy. Things would go far better for you if you were to end this ritual and allow us to return to the Great Library."

"Ah, so you *are* pleading after all!" Seiren crowed.

"Oh, I'm not pleading. If anything, I'm threatening you. You see, if you go through with this, the Devourer will end your existence even as he strives to undo all of creation. If you stop this madness now, however, Lilith and I will protect you from him."

"Reluctantly," Lilith groaned from nearby.

"Nice try," the demoness purred. "But you're forgetting one thing. Ceasing to exist would be a boon for me, so whether I achieve untold power or experience betrayal from the brute, I still win."

With that, Seiren raised a metal staff and brought it down on each of the Keeper's legs, hard enough to shatter bone. Eve closed her eyes as the first blow struck, but she did not cry out.

"Now stop trying to distract me. Did you think I wouldn't notice you healing yourself again? You're not escaping, Keeper; make it easy on yourself and lie still. It'll all be over at daybreak."

As Kaname had predicted, the drive was not an easy one. In some places there was literally panic in the streets, and the highways were filled with vehicles fleeing one way or another, trying in vain to escape a world that had gone mad.

From the passenger's seat, Hazuki tried to calm herself sufficiently to "read" the location of the missing sisters, but so far she had felt only flashes pointing them in a general direction. Kaname, as traffic

allowed, scanned the radio for news stories, finding one near-hysterical broadcast after another regarding worldwide reaction to the crack in the sky (which seemed to be appearing directly overhead from anywhere on Earth), but there were no clues to be had.

"Anything?" Kaname asked as she swerved to avoid a pile-up on the highway.

"It's more Northwest now," Hazuki frowned. "Can't really pinpoint anything yet, but I can definitely feel them now that we're away from Kaori-san." She closed her eyes and tried to clear her thoughts sufficiently to send them to the missing sisters, but she was having no end of difficulty maintaining any sort of focus. Not for the first time, she wished Chikaru and Tamao were here, but after what she had just seen at the school, she was grateful that they remained in the safety of the Great Library.

"Well, here's a clue that we might be going the right way," Kaname said suddenly, bringing Hazuki out of her latest attempt. A long line of brake lights was fast approaching. "Looks like a roadblock."

Hazuki rolled down her window, unbuckled her seat belt, and leaned up and out of the cab of the truck, trying to see what was ahead. The road was indeed blocked at the bridge over the Yura River, and cars were being redirected to either turn around or go another way. As they drew closer, she realized from the look of the vehicles and the uniforms that this was not a police procedure.

"It's military," Hazuki said as she slipped back into the cab. " *Rikujo Jieitai*, it looks like."

"Let me guess: we need to get through, don't we?" Kaname asked.

"We do."

"Then hang on. This might get a little rough."

Kaname switched the truck into four-wheel, turned off the headlights, and swerved sharply off the highway, plunging into the moonlit night. Hazuki got her belt back into place just in time to avoid being tossed through the window she'd just opened.

"Can you even *see* like this?" Hazuki shouted.

"Hey, you wanted me to drive! Deal with it!"

Before long, they were back on another road, this time heading Northeast. "There's another bridge further up the river," Kaname said, switching the headlights back on and accelerating. "Check the radio again: maybe there'll be something about the road closures."

Hazuki scanned the dial back and forth, but the few stations broadcasting were a continued babble of near-panic and nonsense.

"Wait, go back to that last one!" Kaname said suddenly. "They said something about Miyazu, and that's Northwest of us." Hazuki dialed it back to the previous station, and indeed, a local report was being given.

"--ved to be complete at this time. All roads leading into Miyazu have been shut down, though outgoing traffic will be permitted to pass. Rail service between Mineyama and Shisho has been suspended. Residents of the cities along the Southwestern portion of Wakasa Bay are at this time being encouraged to evacuate to points East of the Yura river. If there are any citizens or visitors still in Miyazu at this time, for your own safety, evacuate immediately, or if it is not safe to do so, take shelter in the safest part of your homes."

"I'll bet that's where our dragons are, then," Kaname nodded. "How long before they send in tanks, I wonder?"

"I don't know this area," Hazuki grimaced. "How far is Miyazu?"

"Might as well be on the moon if we can't get across the river," Kaname growled. "And I don't fancy a swim across the Yura in my

armor."

"It's either that or run a military roadblock. Which do you prefer?"

Kaname shook her head. "There's one other way across. If they've shut down the trains all the way back to Shisho, then we can probably take the rail bridge near the mouth of the river. We may have to go on foot to cross, though. Then it's probably about another five, ten kilometers once we're over. The line goes straight through Miyazu." Even as she said this, the road they were on veered back to the North, and Hazuki could see that they were now driving alongside the aforementioned tracks.

"How soon before--?" Hazuki started, but then there was an unearthly noise of wrenching metal as something smashed into the side of the truck, sending it tumbling off the side of the road. Hazuki held on for dear life as they rolled off the side of the highway, and when the vehicle finally came to a stop, it was lying on its back, with the cab half-crumpled around them. Hazuki immediately ripped out her seat belt and clambered out through the shattered side window, dragging her sword after her. A look overhead revealed a set of leathery wings eclipsing the moonlit sky as their attacker wheeled around to make another pass. This dragon was different from any of the ones they'd yet faced, however, with a bloated body and smoke trailing from its muzzle as it flew.

"Kaname!" she shouted, but there was no response. Hazuki hurried around to the other side of the truck, finding Kaname hanging unconscious in her seat. Hazuki wrenched the mangled door open, snapped the seat belt with a vicious tug, and dragged her schoolmate clear as the dragon bore down on them, breathing a long gout of flame as it passed. Holding Kaname tightly, Hazuki leaped for cover as the truck exploded behind them.

Realizing quickly that Kaname was out cold, Hazuki quickly dragged her into some hedges, then ran back out into the open, sword drawn and at the ready. As expected, the flame-breather was coming around to make yet another pass, this time with claws extended,

looking to snatch her from where she stood. At the last possible moment, Hazuki ducked and tumbled forward, then brought her sword up into the beast's underbelly, letting its own momentum deliver the killing blow as Hazuki split it from sternum to tail.

Even as this one landed in a messy heap, Hazuki scanned the skies, seeing two more. " *Come on!"* she screamed up at them. " *Who's next?"*

When the two dragons chose instead to fly back toward the Northwest, Hazuki rushed back to Kaname. The older girl was still out, having taken a bad blow to the head during the crash. Hazuki pressed her sleeve against the wound for a few moments, hoping that Kaname's *Souma* would stop the bleeding quickly, as it generally did for Hazuki's own injuries.

So what now?

The tracks were less than a stone's-throw away, so at least Hazuki had a path to follow, but with Kaname unconscious, she would either have to leave her behind or carry her. Carrying her would, of course, slow them down hugely: if she went on alone, she could cover the remaining twenty kilometers or whatever it was in an hour or two. Longer than that might be more time than Eve and Lilith had. With so much at stake, speed was of the essence. Once the bleeding stopped, Kaname would be safe here.

Except of course that she wouldn't be. The very first dragon they'd met had known Hazuki by her *Souma*, and surely it was this "scent" that had drawn the most recent enemies to attack their truck. If she left Kaname here, it would only be a matter of time before a dragon found her.

With a growling sigh, Hazuki did the only thing she could. Taking care first to ensure that the other girl's katana was still securely belted on, Hazuki picked Kaname up, threw her awkwardly over one shoulder, and made her way as quickly as she could toward the train tracks.

To say that Tamao had never been this scared in her life would be the epitome of understatement.

She was alone, weaponless and terrified, cowering behind one of the endless bookcases as the Devourer forced more and more of his mass into the library through the mystic circle on the wall. Somehow she'd lost track of Chikaru as she'd fled, and she could not even remember where she'd left her naginata, not that she expected it would do much good against *that* . Surely the scaly nightmare would smell her out, or at the very least hear her thunderous heartbeat, and would make a quick end of her.

After a long while passed, however, and the end did not come, Tamao crept back toward the central pathway and peeked out from the outermost bookcase.

She could see the Devourer now from nose to tail, but for some reason she found it almost impossible to focus on all of him at once. He looked far too large to fit into the relatively small space between this level of the library and the next, and Tamao found herself incongruously reminded of lessons in theoretical mathematics: it was as though he were a creature of four dimensions trying to fit himself into a three-dimensional space, so that only part of him was fully formed at any moment.

Whatever and wherever he was, though, at least he was not doing any devouring yet. He seemed uninterested in the library itself, much less Tamao, focusing his terrible eyes on the book that lay open on the floor before him.

What was he waiting for?

Kaname awoke to the sounds of battle, and as she tried to clear her spinning vision, she found herself lying just outside a deserted rail station while Hazuki traded blows with no fewer than four small dragons. Hazuki was a blur of steel and fury, hacking a wing here, a

tail there, gutting one while beheading another. Kaname tried to rise and draw her sword, but her head swam with vertigo, and for a moment she thought she might throw up, pass out, or both.

With a vicious cry, Hazuki grabbed the last one by one of the horns on its head and severed its neck with a final left-handed slash.

"Where are we?" Kaname croaked as she managed to get to her knees.

Hazuki looked around at her, an unmistakable flash of relief crossing her features. "Kaname," she sighed. "Are you okay?"

"Head hurts," she said simply.

"It'll pass in a few minutes," Hazuki nodded. " *Souma* has its advantages."

"Where are we?" Kaname asked again, trying to focus on one of the nearby signs.

"Tangoyura station, far side of the rail bridge. You were right: we were able to cross there without trouble."

"Tangoyura," Kaname repeated, trying to remember her local geography. "How did we get here? Last thing I knew we were crashing."

"I carried you," Hazuki said simply, checking the skies for more wings.

"Carried me?" Kaname said, then shook her aching head as she realized she was sounding like a parrot. "That's… that had to be close to ten kilometers."

"I wasn't counting."

"Whole universe at stake, and you carried me all this way?" Kaname said, trying very hard to be annoyed with Hazuki, out of habit if

nothing else. Inside, however, she was nothing short of stunned. "You… you could have left me."

Still holding the last dragon's head in one hand and her sword in the other, Hazuki looked back at Kaname, an unreadable expression on her face. "No, I couldn't."

Kaname stared at this impossible girl for a long while as her vision cleared, trying to make sense of it all.

"Besides," Hazuki said, turning away. "I already saw you get eaten once today. Not happening again on my watch." She tossed the severed head aside, and it landed on the pavement with a soft *plop* . "Ready to go?"

"I think so," Kaname said quietly, pushing herself the remaining distance to her feet. She looked around for her helmet, then realized it would be back in Kojima-sensei's truck. Unmasked from here, apparently. "How many fights did I miss?"

"Three. All the more reason this is probably the right way."

"Let's get moving, then."

Even with both of them conscious, the remaining distance was not without its delays. As expected from the roadblocks, the *Rikujo Jieitai* was massing around the outskirts of Miyazu, and they had to dodge entire battalions as they made their approach. ("So you said you can drive a tank," Kaname said to her at one point. "Feel up to stealing one?")

The thought of military action being taken against their own home soil was quickly added to the running tally of Hazuki's fury. She wondered how many residents of this bay city were still huddled in their homes, waiting to be killed by either scaly monsters or friendly fire. More that the Keepers would need to answer for once this was all over.

Thinking about that, of course, kept Hazuki from the other, more haunting images, such as that of her beloved Hatsumi torn apart in the way Kaname's counterpart had been, her carnelian eyes flat and lifeless, or childlike Lilith screaming as the monsters' claws ripped her to pieces…

Perhaps it was because of this preoccupation that Kaname was the first to notice the pillar of golden light reaching between the omnipresent tear in the sky and a point somewhere in the city. "I'm pretty sure that wasn't there when I came to see the *Amanohashidate* with Momomi."

The moon was low in the sky by this time, making it more difficult to navigate the deserted streets. Eventually, though, using the unearthly glow as their beacon, they found their way to a beautiful Romanesque cathedral. The light was coming from one of its spires, and two dragons barred its doors.

"A church," Hazuki growled. "Why is it always a church?"

"Two of them, two of us," Kaname noted. "I'll take left, you take right?"

There was a movement off to one side, and Hazuki whirled to see three more dragons approaching from around the corner of a nearby building. Then another poked its head up from the roof of the structure. "We've got more," she whispered.

"Yeah, you're not kidding," Kaname said nervously. More and more dragons were appearing from every direction, slinking out from side streets, emerging from between buildings, coming around the sides of the cathedral itself, and perching on every rooftop.

Hazuki and Kaname stood back to back, swords drawn, as the circle of monsters tightened around them. "How many of them do you reckon?" Kaname asked.

"I lost count after thirty."

"Nice. Want to do a contest of how many we each kill, *Lord of the Rings* style?"

"You've read *Lord of the Rings?* "

"Yeah, bite me. Got an attack plan?"

"The fat ones are fire-breathers," Hazuki said over her shoulder. "Go for them first."

"Right." Kaname nodded, letting out a steadying breath. "Hazuki, it's been an honor."

"It has?" Hazuki asked, looking back over her shoulder again.

Kaname gave Hazuki a shadow of her normal smirk. "Nah, not really. But that's what you're supposed to say at times like this, isn't it?"

The first dragons lunged forward, and the battle was on.

As Tamao crouched near the edge of the bookcase, trying to think of something -- anything, really -- that she could do apart from wait for Hazuki and Kaname to return with the Keepers, a second low-pitched vibration suddenly filled the vast spaces of the library, causing some of the books to quiver on their shelves. Tamao placed her hand against some of the nearest ones, taking momentary comfort in the humming "presence" within each book, then once again peeked out to see what was happening.

On the floor beneath the impossibly coiled Devourer, the second circle of glyphs was now glowing, as was the book at its center. The dragon gave a low roar of what sounded like satisfaction, then poised itself over the open volume and began lowering its massive jaws toward the fluttering pages.

Tamao felt a surge of panic. Was this it, then? Was the Devourer going to make good on its name and consume this entire world, with

Hazuki still inside? Was there any way to stop it?

But then something happened that again made Tamao's brain ache as she tried to focus her eyes upon it. As it drew within inches of the book, the beast's muzzle seemed to shrink to the tiniest fraction of its size, as though it were being squeezed through some invisible funnel. It pressed forward, more and more of it condensing grotesquely, until the tip of its nose touched the topmost page, and then, with a sizzling sound, it began to push through.

It was then that Tamao realized what was happening. The Devourer was not going to consume this world at all.

He was going to enter it.

Fighting like never before, Hazuki had beheaded, disemboweled and practically filleted six of the dragons before taking her first hit: a rake from a claw that sent her flying into a nearby wall. Kaname was quickly there to back her up, though, holding off the charge until Hazuki could shake off the spinning stars and lunge back into the thick of things. Moments later, she had the chance to return the favor by cleaving the head of one of the smaller, quicker ones as it was about to strike Kaname from behind.

For longer than could be imagined possible the fight continued in that very manner, each of them saving the other's life again and again as the streets around them became littered with scaly corpses. They took every advantage of their size and quickness, pushing themselves to the limit to keep one step ahead of the swiping talons and flaming maws.

One thing they could not do, however, was get any closer to the cathedral, as the beasts were massing at the entrance. Every time Hazuki tried to press her way closer, she was quickly outnumbered and forced to drop back. It was going to be a war of attrition, if anything, and the only question now was how many more would the two of them have to get through.

Kaname let out a full-throated yell of pain and fury as a claw ripped her leg. Part of her armor was torn off with the blow, but had it not been for that, she would probably have lost the leg entirely. She quickly made the offending dragon pay for it with a sword to the throat, then spun to take the head of another. She was favoring the leg now, but a spike of adrenaline seemed to be more than making up for it as she hacked away, cursing and screaming all the while.

Above them, the stars were disappearing as the approaching dawn filled the sky with color. Beneath them, the streets ran thick with blood to the point that footing was becoming an issue. And yet, slowly but surely, the ranks of the dragons were thinning. Finally, as the first light of day hit the rooftops, they dispatched the final guards in front of the cathedral doors.

Even as the last one fell, though, there was a deafening thunderclap from above, and when Hazuki looked heavenward, she saw that the beam of light from the roof of the cathedral had turned from gold to red, and the rip in the sky was widening.

"That's bad, isn't it?" Kaname yelled over the noise as she limped to Hazuki's side.

"Come on!" Hazuki shouted in reply, throwing her shoulder into the massive double doors and forcing them open. Sword gripped in both hands, she charged into the sanctuary.

She had just enough time to take in the horrifying sight of Eve tied to the altar before a blast of energy slammed into her and knocked her several steps back. She barely avoided being skewered by Kaname's sword as her companion caught her. A second blast came, and they dove to either side, taking refuge behind the rear pews.

"Hello again, Hazuki," came an incongruously sweet and unmistakably familiar female voice. "So it *is* you after all. You're too late, you know."

Hazuki looked across the aisle at Kaname. She brought her wrists together, then made a cutting motion with one hand. Kaname nodded and crawled off toward the outside aisle even as Hazuki warily stood to face this enemy.

Standing in front of the altar was a tall, statuesque beauty with long ice-blue hair, dressed in a flowing white gown that was stained up and down with blood. Hazuki recognized that deceptively angelic face from her travels: it was the demoness who'd masqueraded as a teacher for little Milka even as she tried to steal the girl's power.

"Seiren?" she said, wonderingly.

"You remember me!" Seiren smiled, stepping down from the altar. She held a staff made of some sort of greenish metal that glowed at the tip with the same energy that had recently blasted Hazuki. "Are you surprised to see me?"

"Frankly, yes," Hazuki scowled. "I was hoping for something more than a bit-player demon to be the one bringing about the end of all creation. Are you the best the Devourer could come up with?"

The smile faded in an instant. "You cannot *fathom* the powers at my command!" Seiren spat back, the glow of the staff intensifying as she took another step forward.

Behind Seiren, Hazuki could see that Eve was watching her. She was still alive, then: all that remained was to buy Kaname more time. "Oh, please. You couldn't even steal the *Souma* from a five-year-old girl. Did you think you'd be able to pull *this* off?"

"I already have! With every drop of Eve's blood that spills, the portal opens wider. The Devourer will feast on their flesh, and then all will be unmade!" Seiren raised the staff, pointing the glowing end toward Hazuki. "You, however, will be dead by then."

Hazuki rolled her eyes dramatically. "Blah blah blah, monologue monologue monologue. Does that kind of talk come naturally to

demons, or do you have to take special classes?"

With a shriek, Seiren fired another glowing bolt from her staff. Hazuki brought her sword up to block it, only to have this attempt at defense fail spectacularly. She found herself blown off her feet, landing in a crumpled heap toward the back of the sanctuary. Before she could grab her sword and get to her feet, though, Seiren was standing over her, pointing the tip of the staff at her throat.

"Laugh this one off," the demoness grinned, but before she could strike, her eyes widened with shock as the bloody tip of a blade sprouted from her chest. Hazuki looked up to see Kaname standing behind Seiren, and her heart sank. Had Kaname misunderstood her?

Seiren looked down at the blade sticking out from between her ribs and made a sour face. "Well, that's inconvenient," she growled, then tore herself off the sword, whirled round, and slammed Kaname with the staff, sending her crashing into the pews. This, however, gave Hazuki the time to get back to her feet. They traded blows with staff and sword then, sparks of *Souma* and demon energy flashing as the thunder from outside grew in volume and intensity.

Another blast knocked Hazuki to the floor again, but rather than go in for the quick kill, Seiren took a last moment to gloat. "Poor Hazuki. You're strong, but in the end, you're still mortal."

Hazuki looked past Seiren, then, and smiled. Kaname had understood after all: just not in the way Hazuki had expected. "True," she admitted, pointing past the demoness, "but *she's* not."

Seiren looked over to meet the eyes of a pale, bloodied, bedraggled, and thoroughly pissed-off Lilith. "Laugh *this* one off," the Keeper snarled, then punched the demoness with a wild right hook. What it lacked in technique it made up for in sheer fury, and Seiren collapsed to the floor, seemingly more hurt by this blow than by the sword that had impaled her.

Hazuki backed away as Lilith leaped on top of Seiren, both of her slender hands wrapping around the throat of the demoness. She had never seen the Keeper so terrifying as this, and all she could do for the moment was watch.

"Allow me to grant you a boon, you *bitch*," Lilith spat. With that said, Seiren let out a high-pitched wail as her body dissolved into energy, which Lilith drew into herself, leaving no trace except the echo of her final scream.

"Damn," Kaname said in a low voice as she returned to the scene to help Hazuki stand.

"You came back for me after you cut her loose?" Hazuki asked.

"You're welcome," Kaname smirked.

"But you left--"

Lilith then sprang to her feet, suddenly the very picture of joy. "Oh, Hazuki-chan, I've never been so happy to have Eve not listen to me! We knew you'd come for us!" She then threw her arms around Kaname and gave her a back-breaking hug. "Surely you won't deny me a kiss after this near-death experience?"

"Hey, hey!" Kaname squirmed. "You've got the wrong girl!"

Lilith looked up into Kaname's eyes, then blinked with shock. "But you… you smell just like her! You… you *both* practically *reek* of Yamiyama!"

"Do I get to resent that?" Kaname asked, looking over at Hazuki.

"Um, ladies? Sister bleeding on an altar?" Hazuki reminded them. She dashed down the aisle and up the steps of the dais, where Eve was still bound by glowing tethers. She quickly started using her sword to snap one binding after another.

"Hello, Hazuki-chan," Eve said in a weak voice.

"We'll get you out of here," Hazuki said softly, focusing solely on the cords of energy. "Are you badly hurt?"

"My legs are broken. She was bleeding me from my hands, but that should stop once you take me off the altar and I can heal myself. Hazuki-chan..?"

"We have Ken-chan with us, but he's in a bad way. Can you heal him so he can get us out of this book?"

"Hazuki-chan, why won't you look at me?" Eve said in a tiny voice.

Hazuki took a deep breath. "Because if I look at you, I'll fall in love with you again."

"No," Eve replied in a strangely regretful tone. "You won't, Hazuki-chan."

Only then did Hazuki look into those eyes that had been her inspiration and her dream for so long. Eve smiled weakly as Hazuki gathered the girl up in her arms and carried her from the altar. "Thank you, dear sister."

"The two of you have a lot to answer for," Hazuki said in a low voice, trying to find her anger again even as those soft eyes sought her. "Friends of mine are dead, there's a school in ruins, and who *knows* how much chaos this world has suffered?"

"I know, Hazuki-chan. I felt it all."

"You did?" Hazuki asked, surprised at such an admission.

Eve nodded. "Every birth and every death. I feel them all. It's who I *am*, Hazuki-chan. But all of this can be put right once we return to the Great Library."

"All of it?"

"All the lives, all the damage. Lilith and I can undo what has been done. And then you can be angry at me for the rest of your life if you must. I wouldn't blame you if you were, to be honest."

Hazuki carried Eve to the back of the sanctuary, where Lilith and Kaname were still going back and forth with one another about *Souma*, and similarities to Yamiyama, and pounding hearts and heaving bosoms. It was a terrifyingly familiar conversation, and even after what Eve had just told her, Hazuki could not help but be amused at seeing someone else take the brunt of Lilith's affections for a change.

The momentary lightness of mood was quickly broken, however, by a roar that shook the very ground beneath them. They hurried outside even as pieces of the church's ceiling began to fall in from above.

The carnage outside was more hideous than ever under the light of morning, but it was not the corpses of endless dragons that drew the attention of the two humans and two Keepers.

Far above them, the face of what had to be the mightiest dragon of all had appeared in the hole in the sky. Even as it reached its head and neck through, its claws came up to either side of the rip and forced it further open, trying to squeeze its shoulders past as well. Somewhere, Hazuki knew, Kaori would be screaming.

" ***I HAVE COME FOR MY SACRIFICE!"*** it boomed in a voice that shook the world.

"We're too late," Eve whispered.

Hazuki set Eve down gently, then reached into her skirt pocket for the still form of Ken-chan. "No, we're not. Heal Ken-chan, and get back to the library."

"We can't," Lilith said, shaking her head frantically. "Nothing can pass through while he's stuck between worlds like this. Not even

Ken-chan."

"Heal Ken-chan, then, and let me deal with the rest," Hazuki insisted, pressing the bird into Eve's hands. She stared into those endless eyes a moment longer, then allowed herself a smile. "I won't let him have you, Hatsumi."

She picked up her sword and strode out toward the corpse-strewn street. Kaname hurried after her and grabbed her by the shoulder. "Wait, where are you going?"

Hazuki turned a knowing smile on Kaname. "Where do you think?" she asked, simply.

And then she jumped.

By this time the head and neck of the dragon had vanished into the pages as Tamao watched anxiously. Had Hazuki and Kaname failed, then? Was it too late?

"Tamao-chan!" Chikaru's voice suddenly echoed from elsewhere in the library. "We have to get him out of there!"

"How?" she shouted back.

"I have a plan! We have to get him out of the book, and then I need you to grab it and run! Go as deep into the library as you can, down the narrowest corridors you can find!"

"What are you going to do?"

"Something incredibly reckless and probably dishonorable," Chikaru said, sounding almost amused with the idea. "But these are desperate times!"

To Tamao's deepening shock, she saw Chikaru rush out from between two bookcases near the opposite side of the atrium, her

naginata trailing green sparks as she charged straight at the Devourer.

Kaname watched with wonder as Hazuki leaped to the nearest rooftop in a single bound, then kicked herself off and upward, straight toward the maw of the dragon high overhead. She was practically flying.

"What is she *doing?* " Kaname shouted.

"Being too insanely fearless for her own good," Lilith said, her earlier look of fear turning into a wry smile. "In other words, she's being Hazuki."

As Hazuki continued to sail through the sky toward the Devourer, Kaname shook her head at the sheer absurdity of it all. They had done fine against these little ones, but how was Hazuki going to fight *that?*

The answer came to Kaname with a clarity that shocked her.

"Not alone, she's not," she whispered.

Trying to do as Hazuki had done, Kaname took three quick steps, then jumped for the roof. Her bad leg barked at her as she made the spring, but to her surprise, the leap carried her all the way up, where she landed in a crouch and then pushed off with all her strength.

And then she, too, was flying straight at the Devourer, and for a moment, she was so amazed at her own strength that she didn't have time to question how insane she was for even attempting this. She was not flying, at least not in the conventional gravity-defying superhero sense of the word, and she knew that if she missed this moving target she was certain to leave a spectacular mark once she fell back to Earth again.

More unnerving was how long she was spending in the air. How high up was she jumping, anyway? And more to the point, how big *was* that dragon?

The Devourer snapped at Hazuki as she drew near, intending to take her out in one bite, but somehow, Hazuki seemed to twist out of the way in mid-air and grab the dragon by the scales on the tip of its nose. She then scrambled up onto the beast's head and started hacking away in the area of its eyes.

Now the target was moving more than ever as it tried to shake Hazuki off, and for a terrible few moments, it looked like Kaname was going to miss it, but then it swung past again and she managed to catch hold of it by a bit of the fleshy whisker-like fringe on the edge of its lower jaw. For a while, all she could do was hold on as the Devourer rocked back and forth, but then she managed to bring her sword up and plant it in the underside of the dragon's jaw, sinking it to the hilt between two scales. Sparks flew from above as Hazuki continued hacking away, and Kaname repeatedly stabbed it in this relatively vulnerable spot. She had no idea if she were doing any appreciable damage, but she could not reach the throat from here, so this would have to do.

All at once, the Devourer gave an agonized roar that nearly shook Kaname loose, but as it was she lost her grip on her sword, sending it plummeting toward the church far below. Then, to her horror, she heard a shouted curse from Hazuki as the other girl fell from the dragon's snout. Kaname's free hand shot out, and she managed to catch the shoulder of Hazuki's uniform. It immediately began to tear, but this was long enough for Hazuki to get a grip on Kaname's wrist.

For a few terrifying moments they dangled there, two schoolgirls hanging from the face of a colossal dragon, but then there was a feeling of motion, and Kaname realized they were drawing closer to the blackness above.

"It's leaving!" she shouted down at Hazuki. "What did you *do?* "

"I got both of its eyes!" Hazuki yelled back. "Thanks for the save!"

"Don't mention it!"

The fight was far from over, of course. Wherever this crack in the sky led to, be it the dragon's own hellish world or somewhere even worse, it would be pretty pissed off at them once they arrived, and now only Hazuki had a sword.

However, when they reached the barrier of black, it was as though Kaname's fingers hit a wall, and to her horror, the bit of whisker she was holding onto slipped straight out of her grasp, leaving the pair of them plummeting from the sky.

"Damn it, that wasn't supposed to happen!" Kaname shouted over the sound of the wind whistling past them as they accelerated toward the ground below.

Hazuki threw her sword to one side as hard as she could, then pulled herself closer to Kaname, wrapping both arms around her from behind in a bearhug.

"Hey, this is no time for you to finally admit your attraction!" Kaname yelled past the deafening wind. And why not go out with a joke, really?

"Dear God, are you still talking?" Hazuki shouted back as she continued to reposition herself, so that the back of Kaname's head was against her chest, and so that both of them were facing straight up.

It was then that Kaname realized what Hazuki was doing. She was making sure that she would hit first.

She laughed as loudly as the rushing air would allow. "I don't think that's going to help!"

"Yeah, bite me!"

The ground had to be awfully close by now. "Hazuki!"

"What?"

"It's been an--!"

She did not get to finish, because it was at that moment that the world rose up to meet them with a sickening crunch.

Tamao looked on with horror as Chikaru leaped into the tangle of wings and limbs and started hacking away with her naginata. With its head stuck in the book, the Devourer had no way of seeing her coming, and even in the tangled mess perceivable by Tamao, the sprays of thick dragon blood were more than apparent. Chikaru struck again and again, cleaving into its side, its legs, its wings… anywhere she could reach.

All at once, the Devourer reared back, its neck and head re-emerging from the book as it filled the library with a howl of rage. Tamao could see that those terrible eyes had been put out, and it thrashed its head from side to side as it searched for the tiny nuisance stabbing away at it.

Not really thinking so much as reacting at this point, Tamao broke from cover, dashed toward the arcane circle, ducked under the enormous flailing claws, grabbed up the book, and without breaking momentum ran past, trying to reach the next bookcase to make her escape.

An ear-splitting roar sounded behind her though, and she was thrown to the floor by the shock of it. Expecting the dragon's claws to be upon her at any moment, she cradled the book against her chest and prayed for a miracle.

There was a sound not unlike an electrical discharge, and the Devourer gave another pained screech. "Oh, no you don't," came

Chikaru's voice from very close by. "Nobody steps on my Tamao-chan."

Tamao opened her eyes to find herself under a shimmering dome of *Souma* . Beside her stood Chikaru, one hand raised as though holding the shield up from the inside.

She was wearing the Hat of the Keepers.

Chikaru turned to Tamao, and the younger girl stared first at the huge blue eye that had opened above the hat's brim, then at Chikaru's own eyes, which were wide and glassy, the pupils dilated to the point that no brown was discernible at their edges.

"Hello, Tamao-chan," Chikaru said in a distant voice. "I don't know how long I have, so I need you to listen *very* carefully, and do *exactly* as I say…"

Next: Angels

Angels

In the ink of an eye I saw you bleed, through the thunder I could hear you scream

Solid to the air I breathe, open-eyed and fast asleep

Falling softly as the rain, no footsteps ringing in your ears

Ragged down, worn to the skin, warrior raging, have no fear

Secure yourself to Heaven, hold on tight, the night has come

Fasten up your earthly burdens, you have just begun

-Indigo Girls

.

All this time I've been workin' them angels overtime

Riding and driving and flying just over the edge

Workin' them angels overtime

-Rush

Part 21: Angels

The first thing Hazuki saw when she opened her eyes was Hatsumi's face smiling down at her, and for a moment, she did not know whether this meant she were alive or dead.

Next came Kaname's voice from close by, which did not really clear things up, considering. "Welcome back."

More details came into focus, and Hazuki realized that they were still in front of the church in Miyazu. Her head was resting in Eve's lap, and the Keeper had one warm hand pressed to each side of her sister's face. Hazuki could feel a flow of *Souma* unlike anything she had ever shared with Chikaru, along with an strange itching sensation as her body continued stitching itself back together. "Did I die?" she asked carefully.

"Briefly," Eve said, "but only in the most crude sense of the word."

"By that she means that when Lilith dragged us over, my head was still lodged in your chest cavity," Kaname elaborated.

Choosing to ignore this, Eve went on. "Your *Souma* stayed with you, though, so it was easy enough to revive you."

"Not that you didn't look done for," Kaname added. "We landed on a dragon, believe it or not, so between that and you I actually managed to survive, albeit with about forty broken bones. So thanks for the airbags, I guess."

Were she able, Hazuki would have laughed at Kaname's comment. She was obviously working very hard to cover up her discomfort with sarcasm, and was pacing restlessly, those bones having apparently been healed with ease. Her armor was all but gone, leaving only the robes beneath. Apparently her sword had landed close by at least, as she was passing it from hand to hand in an agitated manner.

"Not to sound ungrateful," Hazuki whispered, "but why are we still here?"

"I had to delay my attempts to revive Ken-chan," Eve explained. "I suddenly had something more pressing to attend to." She winked down at Hazuki, and at that moment, it was very difficult for Hazuki to hold onto the rage she'd been building all day.

Deciding to save that for later, Hazuki peered into the lightening sky. "I see there's still a hole in the world," she noted.

"Working on that," Lilith said from nearby. She was sitting back on her heels, with both palms pressed against the bare earth beneath her. "It's not going well, though. I haven't got a lot left right now, even after reclaiming that demon's energy. The best I can hope for is to keep him from sticking his nose in again."

"It'll take time to heal Ken-chan properly," Eve nodded. "He's not one of mine, as it were."

"Can Lilith help him, then?" Hazuki asked weakly. "Isn't he one of her aspects?"

"Like I'd claim that little meatball as my own?" Lilith snorted. "No, no, Ken-chan's one of Aaya's."

"It's okay, Hazuki-chan," Eve assured her. "With Seiren's spells gone, Lilith can keep the Devourer safely locked away in the library where he can do no further harm until we return to deal with him."

"He's in the library?" Hazuki gasped, sitting bolt upright even as every nerve screamed at her for this sudden movement.

"Oh, hell," Kaname whispered, looking more pale than ever as the penny dropped for her as well.

"Don't worry about the library," Lilith waved. "He can't hurt any of the books without that demon's magic, and she's done for."

Hazuki exchanged panicked looks with Kaname. "It's not the books I'm worried about!" she shouted. " *Chikaru and Tamao are still in there!"*

"Chikaru, what have you done?" Tamao asked in a tiny voice as she looked up at the wide-open eye of the Keepers' hat. Ken-chan's words echoed in her ears as the hat stared back at her. *You're mortal! That thing will eat you alive!*

"I understand," Chikaru said quietly, seemingly to someone else, then smiled vaguely at Tamao and held out her hand. "Take my hand, Tamao-chan. We have work to do. I'm sorry I didn't have more time to teach you properly about your *Souma*, but it looks like we're going to have some on-the-job training."

Tamao reached to grasp the hand Chikaru offered, feeling the other girl's *Souma* trembling beneath her skin. Also, the exchange of energy she'd felt during their brief meditation did not happen, as Chikaru seemed to be holding back from her for the moment.

"It's okay, Tamao-chan," Chikaru went on. "Hazuki and Kaname rescued the Keepers, but they need our help to get back again. This world needs to be healed so they can escape."

"Can the hat take us to them?" Tamao asked, looking for a solution that would get that thing off Chikaru's head as quickly as possible. "Then we can give it back to the Keepers."

Chikaru looked away for a moment, as if conferring with someone outside of hearing. "It won't let me," she said. "It won't leave while the library is compromised like this, and even if it would, the attempt would both fail and kill me. It's up to you, Tamao-chan: you need to seal those rips in the pages."

"Me? But… can't the hat do that?"

"No," Chikaru said with a tiny shake of the head. "That's not where its power lies. But yours is different, Tamao."

A soft, distant smile settled over Chikaru's features as she knelt beside the younger girl. "It's just as well that Heaven's a library, and that the worlds are made of pages and words, because those are your tools. Words on the page are yours to command, and they always have been. You're a storyteller, my darling: building worlds is what you *do* . Now, someone's hurt this story, so it can't ever be completed, and you need to help it along. Tell the story, Tamao-chan. Tell the story that will bring our loved ones home."

" ***YOU WILL FAIL, MORTALS,"*** came the voice of the Devourer from outside the shield of *Souma* around them. " ***YOU HAVE NOT THE STRENGTH. I CAN SMELL THE LIFE BLEEDING OUT OF YOU!"***

"Do you love Hazuki-chan?" Chikaru asked, ignoring the dragon.

"Of course I do."

"And… do you love me?"

"Both of you, with all my heart."

"Then trust me, Tamao-chan," Chikaru whispered. "Tell the story. And don't stop, whatever happens."

Tamao felt a something warm pass through their joined hands, flying directly into the source of her own *Souma* . When they touched, Tamao felt herself suddenly flooded inside with their joined power, and she realized that Chikaru had just sent her a part of her own source. Chikaru was all around her and all inside her, and the feeling of oneness with this dear woman was wondrous, intoxicating, and danger be damned, it was *very* erotic.

"Concentrate," she heard Chikaru whisper. "Tell the story, my love."

From behind Chikaru, far from their joined hands, Tamao could feel another presence of *Souma*, but rather than generating energy, this one was greedily drawing it in. Chikaru was protecting her from it, though, allowing its seemingly infinite knowledge to filter through while Tamao's energy remained safe from its relentless pull. With new eyes, now, Tamao looked at the book she still clutched to her chest, and found it to be something beautiful in both its deceptive simplicity and its underlying intricacy. Words and pages. This was how worlds were made, and she was getting to see it.

Then, with a pain like severed nerves, she felt the hole torn in reality, and the agony the world was experiencing, focusing down on the tiny

presence of this world's own bearer of *Souma* . "Kaori-sama," she whispered.

"Layers of irony," Chikaru said, seemingly from a great distance.

Suddenly, Tamao became aware of another presence, touching the rip from the other side. *Well, hello there. You don't feel like a dragon. Are you helping?*

"I'm trying," Tamao said aloud, hoping to reach this other voice.

She could almost feel a smile from the other side. *So nice to feel a familiar energy! I can't do a whole lot from here, but I'll help as much as I can.*

"Thank you," Tamao whispered, then tried to let her energy flow into the gaps in the form of words: poems she had written, confessions of love she had given, hopes and fears of the future, and anything else that she could bring to mind. She poured her heart into this story, trying to soothe its pain and make it whole again, while the happy voice from beneath helped her arrange the words and thoughts to begin mending the damage.

" ***STOP WHAT YOU ARE DOING!"*** the Devourer roared. " ***THAT WORLD IS MINE, AS ARE THE KEEPERS! STOP NOW, OR SUFFER!"***

"You'll have to do a lot better than that, scales," Chikaru said on the edge of Tamao's hearing. "I don't respond well to empty threats."

A hoarse noise echoed around them, and Tamao realized with dread that the dragon was laughing. " ***VERY WELL. THEN YOU WILL STOP AT ONCE, OR I WILL BEGIN BURNING DOWN SHELVES ONE BY ONE. I DO NOT NEED MY EYES FOR THAT. HOW MANY WORLDS WILL PERISH IN FLAMES, MORTALS?"***

"There, that's more what I was expecting," Chikaru smiled. "But I'm afraid that won't work either. You're making a big mistake threatening

a mortal like that. I'm not a Keeper; do you think I care about the worlds you burn?"

Tamao was stunned and more than a little frightened at Chikaru's proclamation. Would she really let entire worlds die just to save Hazuki, Kaname and the Keepers?

" ***GIVE ME THE BOOK, OR INFINITE LIVES WILL BURN!"***

"Again, I'll never understand villains. Do you expect me to believe they won't burn anyway if I give you what you want?"

" ***THEIR DEATHS WILL BE ON YOUR HANDS!"***

"I can live with it," Chikaru said, her lip curling back in her best Carmen sneer. "But I will *not* let you hurt the women I love!"

"Something's happening up there," Lilith said suddenly, looking up toward the blackness. "Someone's trying to seal the book."

"Who is it?" Hazuki asked, looking from one Keeper to the other.

Lilith gave a distant smile. "Oh, she's good, this one. Too many humans with *Souma*, if you ask me, but I'm not complaining this time. Hang on, it's… Tamao-chan? Oh, I get it! It's *your* Tamao! She says hello, by the way."

Overhead, the edges of the black rift were starting to draw closer together while Hazuki watched with wonder. She was really doing it: Tamao was actually healing the world. "How is she able to..?"

"Looks like she's one of mine," Lilith grinned cheekily. "Don't worry, I'll help her. She may be a natural, but she doesn't really know what the hell she's doing."

"What about the Devourer?" Kaname asked.

"Huh," Lilith frowned. "Looks like your other friend's holding him off…"

With another roar, the Devourer returned to slamming his massive talons against the shell protecting Tamao and Chikaru. With each successive strike, Tamao could feel the hat take more of Chikaru's energy to fuel the defense, causing her remaining source to flicker and dim. " ***THEN I WILL DRAIN YOUR MORTAL SHELL DRY AND TAKE WHAT IS MINE!"***

"Damn, I was hoping I could keep him talking," Chikaru said at the edge of Tamao's hearing. "He was bluffing, by the way: he can't hurt the books in his current state: not without magic or *Souma* ."

"You knew that?"

" *Focus*, Tamao-chan. I don't mean to sound overly dramatic, but I'm not sure how much more of this I can take."

"Please, Chikaru, take some of the energy back! This is *killing* you!"

" *Tell the story*, Tamao-chan!" Chikaru repeated, forcefully. "And don't stop, *no matter what!* "

"She's doing it," Lilith grinned. "She's scared out of her mind, but she's… she's *done* it!"

The sky was whole once more, and Hazuki felt as though the entire world around them was letting out a sigh of relief. "Nicely done, Tamao-chan," she said in an awed whisper.

Lilith stood and clapped her hands briskly. "How's the birdie, Eve?" she asked.

Eve shook her head. "Still very weak, onee-chan."

"Fine, you keep on that. I'll take things from here." She then turned to Hazuki and gave her a grim little smile. "Well, Hazuki-chan, you're finally going to get your wish."

"I don't understand," said Hazuki, shaking her head with confusion.

"It's like this: now that the world's back in one piece, Eve and I have an alternate way to slip out. I need you to kill me."

"What?" Hazuki shouted, not sure which horrified her more: the idea of doing it, or the fact that Lilith had couched this as her "wish." Did Lilith really think so poorly of her?

"Here, I'll make it easy for you," Lilith went on, unfastening her tie and unbuttoning the front of her Miator uniform, revealing her expansive cleavage. "Stab here, right between the squishy things."

"I… I can't do that!" Hazuki sputtered.

"Oh yeah, no sword," Lilith nodded. "Fine. Snap my neck, then. Just get on with it already!"

"That's not what I meant!" Hazuki insisted. "It's got nothing to do with the sword, I just… how do you expect me to just *kill* you, after…?"

"I'll just go poof and re-form in the library!" Lilith growled, waving both hands in the air. "Come *on!* "

"Oh, for Heaven's sake," Kaname muttered, nudging Hazuki to one side and burying her sword in Lilith's chest.

There was a long silence, broken only by the sickening sliding sound of Kaname withdrawing her katana.

"Mother- *f***er*, that *hurt!* " Lilith grimaced before falling to the ground, her blood pooling beneath her. Moments later, she began to glow with *Souma*, and was gone.

Kaname looked at Hazuki. "What? *One* of us needs to the dirty work around here!"

The pain of her quick death already fading, Lilith found herself standing once more in the Great Library, smiling as she felt her old familiar clothes against her skin. Those school uniforms were far too binding for her tastes.

Two other women were with her, and she smiled as she recognized the familiar pretty face of Tamao, even knowing that this was not the one she'd gone to school with. The other girl she did not immediately recognize, but it was all too plain to see that she was in pain beneath the weight of the hat.

"You did well, both of you," Lilith said in a reassuring voice. "Give me the hat, now. I'll handle the rest."

"Behind you," the strange girl whispered, pointing over Lilith's shoulder.

"I know," she said with a nod and a smile.

Behind her, the Devourer slammed into the barrier of Souma being held up by the hat, and the girl wearing it collapsed into Tamao's arms. Lilith snatched the hat from her head and placed it on her own in one quick motion, then turned to face the dragon to whom she was to have been sacrificed.

"Hey there, big fella! Thought you were dead," she grinned impishly as the Devourer shrank back from her. Now that she and the hat were joined again, she felt stronger than ever: more than powerful enough to deal with this pest.

" ***I HAVE NO QUARREL WITH YOU, KEEPER,"*** the dragon growled.

"That's pretty ballsy coming from someone who was going to try to eat me less than an hour ago," Lilith snorted.

With a savage roar, the Devourer swiped at her with a claw larger than she was, but inches from her face it collided with an impermeable wall of *Souma* and snapped back. With a sigh, Lilith undid the top button of her shirt, reached in between her breasts, and pulled out her much-loved riding crop, smacking it into the palm of her opposite hand a few times as she faced down the suddenly worried-looking Devourer.

She had to admit that Eve had been right: going to school had indeed been a lot of fun. This, however, was going to be even better.

"You made a big mistake coming to this library," she smiled sweetly. "Now that you're in *my* lair, it really changes the power dynamic between us, doesn't it? Now *sit*, dragon!" She brought the crop down on the Devourer's nose, channeling her *Souma* through it as it struck.

The beast writhed as green lightning arced up and down its body, and even as it struggled, it began to grow smaller and smaller, the power condensing around it.

"Oh, what's this?" Lilith said in a mocking voice. "Tempus is fugiting? Where *does* all the time go?"

" ***WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO ME?"*** the beast wailed as it continued to shrink under the crushing shell of Lilith's energy.

"Giving you a second childhood," Lilith grinned.

In moments, the Devourer collapsed further inward on itself, growing smaller and younger until it was barely the size of a newt. Then the Souma around it formed into a shell, and with a last flash of energy, all that was left of the beast was a tiny mottled egg, less than half the size of a chicken's.

Lilith picked up the egg, shook it gently, then stuffed it into her shirt. "And that's that!" she smiled, spreading her arms wide as she returned to the two girls behind her. "Lilith-chan is back, and better than ever! No, please, hold your applause."

There was no applause, however: only a soft sobbing. Lilith looked down to see that Tamao was cradling the other girl in her lap -- the one with red bows like Eve's in her hair -- and bright tears were spilling onto her ashen face. To her disquiet, Lilith noticed that the other girl was not breathing.

"Oh, damn," she whispered.

"Is it just me," Hazuki asked, "or has Lilith *really* changed since last I saw her?"

"It's not just you," Eve smiled wistfully, then peered down at the fat little parakeet in her hand. "All better, Ken-chan?"

"Always, in the embrace of a goddess," the bird said, standing to give a small bow.

"Flatterer," Hazuki snorted at him. "Can you take us back now?"

"Let me go first," Eve cautioned her. "Lilith probably has the dragon eating out of her hand by now, but I should go ahead of you just to be sure. I'll send Ken-chan back for you in a moment."

"As you wish, Lady Eve!" Ken-chan squawked. "Revived and renewed by the touch of your lovely fingers, I am at your service."

" *Now*, please," Eve laughed. Then, parakeet still in hand, she vanished from sight.

Once the two Spican girls were alone, Kaname took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You saved my life."

"You saved mine, too. Several times, I think."

"Yeah, but…" Kaname looked down at her shoes, then out across the ruined neighborhood. "At the end there, you *died*… trying to save me."

"I would have done it for any of us," Hazuki said softly.

"Fine, I get it, you're a hero, but…" Kaname broke off, and swiped angrily at her eyes, trying to make sure Hazuki couldn't see. "You did it for *me* ."

"Yeah, and you followed me into that fight," Hazuki said with a small sideways grin, "so I think we can call it even."

Kaname let out a sigh of pure exasperation. "God *damn* it, Hazuki, would you just let me *thank* you?"

Hazuki stifled a laugh. "You're welcome. And thank *you* : I couldn't have done it alone."

There was a long silence, broken only by the wind through the deserted streets.

"So, ah, Hazuki?"

"Hmm?"

"Did we *actually* just save all of creation?"

Hazuki considered this for a moment, then nodded at her rival-turned-companion. "You know what? I think we did."

Another long pause followed, as the two unlikely samurai looked anywhere but at one another.

"Kick ass," Kaname said softly.

"I wonder if I'll ever find my sword?" Hazuki wondered aloud.

Kaname snorted. "If you don't, I'll get you another one when we get home."

"So long as it's registered," Hazuki nodded.

"Um, yeah, about that…"

There was a soft *pop*, and then Ken-chan was hovering between them. "Quickly, my lovelies," he said in a somewhat nervous voice. "There's… something you need to see."

When Hazuki appeared with Kaname in the library, the first thing she saw was Lilith, back in her familiar Keeper clothes and wearing the hat, holding up both hands in restraint. "Both of you, just stay calm. This isn't going to be what it looks like, and one hysterical human is as much as I can handle right now."

"What are you talking about?" Hazuki asked, but the sound of Tamao crying was all the answer she needed, and she pushed past the elder Keeper to find a sight that all but made her heart stop.

Tamao was sitting on the floor, holding Chikaru's head in her lap as she wept, absently stroking the older girl's hair. Eve knelt beside them, one of Chikaru's limp hands held between both of hers. Hazuki knelt and took the other hand, finding it cold to the touch, and as she tried to send her *Souma* into Chikaru's shell, she found it empty, with no response to her energy.

"What happened?" she whispered. This couldn't be real. They had won, hadn't they?

"She saved us, Hazuki," Tamao sobbed. "She put on the hat and protected me long enough to heal the book. But now… she's gone…"

"No, she's *not*," Lilith sighed. "That's what I've been trying to *tell* you. She's not gone: she's just *dead* ."

"What difference does it make?" Tamao shouted through her tears.

"It makes *plenty* of difference," Lilith said patiently. "She's not *gone* . She's with *you* ."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" Tamao said wretchedly. "Maybe… maybe she's a… a real angel now, and she'll always be with us that way, but…"

"Tamao," Lilith interrupted, smiling in spite of her obviously fraying patience, "that's not what I meant. She's. W *ith.* You. As in, *inside* you. You know, her *Souma?* "

"It's true," Eve nodded. "I can heal her body, but she needs her energy back. It would seem she was able to leave some of it with you." The young Keeper looked from Tamao to Hazuki and smiled. "She's truly grown into her power if she could do that."

"But… I've been touching her all this time!" Tamao insisted. "Why won't she go back to herself?"

"Can you help?" Hazuki asked Eve.

"Probably," Eve said knowingly, "but I think that you should try first." She closed her eyes and gave her one-time sister a wistful smile. "Complete your circle, Hazuki-chan."

"I can't give it back," Tamao said in a small, frightened voice. "Why can't I give it back to her?"

Suddenly, Hazuki understood. "Because you're afraid," she said quietly. "Just like I was."

"I don't understand."

"Give me your hand, Tamao-chan," Hazuki smiled, remembering that fateful night when the meditation had gone haywire. Maybe there were more lessons still to be learned from that.

As they clasped hands, Hazuki intentionally held back her *Souma*, and to her relief, she felt no exchange between them. It was as she thought after all. "You haven't had time to learn to share your energy," she explained. "I was like that too, for the longest time. Any exchange between me and Chikaru only happened because she trusted herself enough to begin it. I could never make the first step until she showed me how."

"Can you show me?" Tamao whispered.

"Not like she could, but I can *tell* you." Here, Hazuki turned to Tamao and looked deeply into her eyes. "You have to let go… and trust me with what's inside you."

Tamao nodded slowly, squeezing Hazuki's hand. She then closed her eyes and tried to steady her breathing.

Far more quickly than Hazuki would have imagined, a spark of energy passed to her, then a trickle, and finally a torrent, even as Tamao's tears began anew. Hazuki was flooded with warmth, but there was still something Tamao was keeping from her: some guilt that she could not release.

Tell me what it is, Tamao-chan, she whispered across the distance between them.

Haltingly, the answer came. *I love you, Hazuki-chan… and… I love her, too.* She'd been holding back, Hazuki realized, afraid to tell her the depths of her feelings for both of them, lest it drive Hazuki away. As much as they'd skirted around the issue, this was the first time Tamao could bring herself to tell the whole truth in such simple words.

Hazuki smiled. *I know, Tamao-chan. I've always known.*

With an audible sigh of both relief and release, the floodgates opened, and Hazuki found herself filled with not only warmth, but a magnificent, strange fire: the sum of all their energy, three spirits

merged in wonder and joy. Their *Souma* pulsed brilliantly, filling the library with light, and for that infinite moment, they held one another in the most intimate of embraces. Then with seeming reluctance, three separate suns returned to their shells, and Hazuki opened her eyes…

… to see a pair of soft brown eyes looking back at her. "Hi there," Chikaru smiled.

Tamao and Hazuki held her then, feeling the returned warmth of her skin and the touch of her *Souma* as they tried to repeat with arms and bodies the closeness they had just experienced with their souls. "Welcome back," Hazuki whispered, crushing herself against both of these beloved women.

On the edge of perception, she heard Lilith let out a contented sigh. "Okay, I can't be the only one who's completely turned on right now, can I?"

"No comment," Kaname muttered.

At long last, they broke, and Chikaru took a look around. "We did it, then?" she asked, smiling brilliantly when she saw Eve. "Onee-sama," she whispered.

Eve nodded to her, mirroring the smile. "It's so good to see you again, little sister."

"So it's over, then?" Kaname asked, speaking in a brisk voice to hide her obvious discomfort. "I mean, apart from the fixing our world so we can go home part? What happened to the Devourer?"

"Yeah, what *did* happen to him?" Hazuki nodded, looking up at Lilith.

"Oh yeah, I almost forgot," Lilith smiled, reaching into her shirt and pulling out a small egg. "One of my better solutions, if I do say so myself."

"What are you going to do with him now?" Chikaru asked.

Lilith peered at the egg for a few seconds, then smiled wickedly. "I'm going to introduce him to the concept of irony," she giggled. Then, before anyone could ask her what she meant, she popped the egg into her mouth and noisily swallowed it.

Nobody dared break the silence that followed.

Nobody, that is, except Kaname. "Well, *that's* gonna burn on the way out."

Next: Duality

Duality

When you learn to love yourself, you will dissolve all the stones that are cast

You will learn to burn the icing sky, to melt the waxen mask

Yes, to have the gift of true release, this is a peace that will take you higher

I come to you with my offering, I bring you strange fire

-Indigo Girls

Part 22: Duality

Eve cradled the tiny figure in her arms and let a soft, slow breath fall upon the upturned face. In moments, a pair of wide, glazed eyes opened, blinked a few times, and then with a high-pitched squeal of happiness, Kogechibi jumped out of the Keeper's arms and scampered off between two bookcases. "Stay out of Lilith's way, my dear," Eve called after her. "There's still a lot of work to do."

She rose to her feet and brushed herself off, pleased that there had been no lasting damage to Kogechibi. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for all of the others she held dear. "You're angry at me," she said without looking around.

"That's putting it mildly," came Hazuki's voice from nearby. Eve turned to see her one-time sister leaning against one of the nearby shelves, arms crossed, face closed off and stormy.

"I never meant to cause you pain," Eve said in a small voice that sounded hollow even to her own ears.

"Thank you for reviving me when I fell," Hazuki went on, though her voice had an edge to it, and Eve could all but hear the part left unsaid: *even though I died saving you from your own mistake* .

"It is within my power to right the wrongs caused by my own actions… or inactions," Eve said quietly. "The lives lost because of this ill-fated excursion will be regained. The worlds will be re-sealed and restored by Lilith. Life, and time, will go on."

"And meanwhile, you've left behind another sister who'll never know what happened to you. How many have there been, Eve? For every Chikaru to be inspired by you, how many Hazukis are there with their hearts left in ruins?"

"Kaori will know," Eve whispered. "I'll make sure of that. She deserves to know the story, even if no one else will remember in her world."

"Ah, even better," Hazuki snorted. "Another person with a gift and a story that she'll never be able to share. Another lost immortal who's going to outlive her friends, her family and the one she loves. Maybe it would have been a mercy for both of us if you'd just let us die."

"How can you say that?" Eve gasped, looking up at Hazuki in shock. "You're destined for so much more than that!"

"Destined for what, exactly? To keep following you from world to world, seeing the damage you leave in your wake? To keep cleaning up your messes? How long until the next one? How long before you just can't keep yourself out of the mortal world, and the next Devourer comes along to ruin everything?"

Eve had been determined to take her punishment from this dear woman she had betrayed so deeply, but Hazuki's words of reproach were almost more than she could bear. "The mistake was mine, yes," she said quietly. "You can hate me for the rest of your life, but I must ask that you not blame Lilith for any of this. All of it was my idea. I'm the one who brought her into a mortal life with me, and I'm

the one who misjudged the potential for a threat from outside of creation. But Lilith needed this after everything I put her through."

"Needed this?" Hazuki repeated. "Needed to take a vacation in a school filled with eligible girls whose hearts you could break when you left?"

"I wouldn't expect you to understand," Eve whispered, looking away as she realized how that would sound.

When Hazuki spoke again, her voice was shaking with fury. "Oh, really? Why *is* that, exactly? Because my poor mortal mind could never understand the ways of goddesses and angels?"

"That's exactly it, but not in the way you're thinking," Eve sighed. "You see, *I'm* the one who can never truly understand *you*, and that's *all* I want. And the only way I could think of to even try was by living among you. And yes, sometimes that meant I made mistakes."

"Was I a mistake?" Hazuki asked, pointblank.

Eve looked into Hazuki's hooded blue eyes, unsure of what to say, but her silence was all the answer Hazuki needed. "Is that all any of us are to you? Mistakes to be left behind after you're done studying us? Are all my friends who died because of this latest screw-up just toys to be picked up off the floor and dusted off? Are we anything to you?"

"You're *everything* to me," Eve whispered. "Why do you think I've spent so long living out these mortal lives? I want to know you, and be like you. I want to share your stories, and your dreams, and… and your love. I want to know why it is that creation is… worth guarding."

"By leaving it *un* guarded," Hazuki nodded slowly, "and counting on your powers to fix everything in the end if necessary? Answer me this, then. If Chikaru hadn't been clever enough to give a piece of

herself to Tamao before putting on that hat… if that thing had truly sucked her dry… would you have been able to fix it?"

"I… would have been able to restore her life," Eve said quietly, turning away.

"But would she have been the Chikaru that Tamao and I love? Or would *that* Chikaru have been gone forever?"

"I… I don't know, Hazuki-chan. I'm… I'm sorry."

There was a long silence, followed by receding footsteps, as Hazuki left the Keeper without another word.

"Pass me those next ones, please?" Lilith called from the top of the ladder.

Chikaru held up the remaining books, then watched as Lilith returned them to their high shelf. Mending the bookcase itself had been seemingly effortless for the Keeper, but for whatever reason she could not seem to just "magic" the scattered books into place. Each had to be lifted to its spot on the shelves. Where this could have been seen as tedious, though, Chikaru found that she was rather enjoying herself. Lilith was proving to be a lot of fun to talk to, and was remarkably free and easy with information about the worlds, the library itself, and more importantly, the nature of *Souma* . "So why exactly is it that it took Tamao to heal the book there at the end? Why couldn't I have done it?"

"Because she's one of mine," Lilith grinned as she came down from the ladder, "and you're one of Eve's."

"You know, after I met Hazuki and spent some time with her, I worked out a theory about how *Souma* affects mortals, and I'm wondering if you could let me know how close to the mark I was."

"Theorize away," Lilith nodded as they made their way to the next damaged shelf.

"My idea was that *Souma* affects you based on what you're feeling at the time it comes to you. Hazuki wanted to fight her way to Eve's side, and I wanted to carry on her work, so Hazuki became a kick-ass wandering samurai and I became a counselor and advisor to everyone around me."

"Hmm," Lilith nodded. "That's *sort of* right. This is simplifying things a lot, but basically you can think of *Souma* as coming in three flavors based on three roles: the guardian, the healer and the maker. With mortals, what *Souma* does to you is intensify your abilities to be whichever of those three roles is best suited to you. So what you're saying about what you were thinking at the time it came to you is only right in that you're more likely to be thinking thoughts based on who you truly are inside. Hazuki became a guardian because it's in her nature. You became a healer because it's in yours."

"And Tamao became… a maker?"

"Exactly. So it's a good thing all three of you came, with an extra guardian thrown in for good measure, because in the end all of you were needed. Just like it was in the beginning, with me and Eve and Yamiyama."

Chikaru noticed a shadow cross Lilith's face at the mention of this last name, but she could not resist asking. "So where exactly is Yamiyama?"

The shadow turned into a scowl. "Gone. Just like a man, he left the women to do all the hard work. He left us his hat to keep the circle complete and keep the library safe, but we haven't seen hide nor hair of him in… well, I don't even know how long anymore."

"Keep the circle complete, eh?" Chikaru said with a half-grin.

"Well, you *are* talking to a member of the *original* threesome," Lilith winked. "Speaking of which, you've done pretty well for yourself! Hazuki *and* Tamao? Nice partners to have!"

"Very true," Chikaru nodded, "though I still wonder whether or not things would be easier without the enforced celibacy."

Lilith frowned at the Lulim president. " *What* enforced celibacy?"

"There's something I'd like to ask you… that is, if it's something I'm allowed to know."

Eve looked back at Tamao and smiled indulgently. "The inevitable question about the secrets of the universe, eh?" she smiled. "It's vanilla ice cream."

Tamao blinked. "What?"

"Vanilla ice cream. It holds all the secrets of the universe. Hazuki-chan told me that once."

"She… told me that too," Tamao said quietly, feeling a strange twist of discomfort as she looked at this goddess whom Hazuki had once loved. "But that wasn't what I was going to ask you, Naoko-sama. Or… should I call you Eve-sama?"

"You may call me whatever makes you most comfortable," Eve nodded, taking one of Tamao's hands as they strolled down the endless stacks together.

"Then… Naoko-sama… if I may ask… was this all part of your plan?"

"To allow creation to be endangered? Hardly. But I can't be upset with the end result, at least when it comes to you, Tamao-chan."

"That wasn't what I meant. I meant…" Tamao sighed, then tried to reorganize her thoughts. "Before you left our world, you told me that

the time would come when I would never be alone again. And then… through a series of convoluted events, you sent Hazuki-chan to us."

"She *chose* your world, Tamao-chan," Eve told her. "I may have given her a nudge back to the Astraea Hill where I once lived, but she's the one who chose your world as her new home."

"Yes, but you still sent her to us, and then she and I met, and… I have to know. Was that part of some kind of divine plan, that she and I would meet and fall in love?"

Eve looked at Tamao with those incredible eyes of hers, and with a wan smile, softly shook her head. "I only wish it were, Tamao-chan," she said in a small voice. "I wish I could take credit for that particular miracle, but in all honesty, it was only the happiest of accidents that you found one another."

"But… you told me," Tamao said, shaking her head wretchedly. "You told me with such *truth* that I think a part of me knew even then that these were the words of an angel. You were so certain, and it made *me* so certain. Are you saying… you didn't know if it would really happen?"

"Of course not, sweet Tamao," Eve smiled. "I may not have known who it would be, but I knew it would only be a matter of time. I saw it in your heart."

Eve paused in their stroll and placed one warm hand against Tamao's chest, just over that heart. "How could I believe that you would never know love? You have so much to give, and so much to share. This heart is a gift to the world, Tamao-chan, and a gift to any loved one you might choose to share it with."

"Any loved one," Tamao sighed, thinking of the two in her life. Three if she counted Nagisa-chan, who was still so important to her, even after letting her go. And four if she counted Shizuma-sama, who made her Nagisa-chan happy, and…

As though reading her thoughts, Eve's smile widened. "There's room."

The thoughts of Nagisa and Shizuma, however, had reminded Tamao of something else, though: something she was not sure she wanted to know. "Naoko-sama?"

"Hmm?"

"Am I immortal now?"

Eve shook her head slowly. "Not like me, no. A better word for what you are is *ageless* . You'll never grow old, Tamao-chan."

"But my friends… Nagisa-chan, Shizuma-sama… I'll have to watch them grow old and die, won't I?"

"At the end of a long, happy lifetime by their side, yes. Keep the ones you love close to you, Tamao-chan. I think you'll find that your youth will give them strength. And then at the end of their time, I'll be there to wrap them in my arms… just as I will be for all of you."

They walked on until they found a badly damaged book which Tamao recognized as the one in which Hazuki had met Chou'un. Eve picked it up and held it between her hands. "Ryofu Housen," she said quietly, then a glow of *Souma* filled the torn volume and its loose pages. "There you are, little sister. Now, Tamao-chan, would you do me the favor of bringing this to Lilith and letting her know it's ready for her?" Eve put her head to one side and regarded Tamao with an amused expression. "I'm sure she'll want to share the experience with you. It's been a long time since she met another one of hers, and she didn't get along well with the last one."

"My goodness, Hazuki-chan, if I didn't know better, I'd think you were actually worried about me," Lilith grinned over her shoulder.

Hazuki sighed noisily. "I *am* worried about you. I mean, yes, that was quite a trick with the egg, but… look, I'm just a chick with a sword. I don't know anything about mystical convergence and all that. I just need to know that something *weird* isn't going to happen, like the Devourer possessing you, or you giving birth to him, or… or the egg hatching inside you and him ripping his way out like an old sci-fi movie."

After straightening the shelf, Lilith turned back to Hazuki and gave her a sardonic smile. "Very well, Hazuki-chan. I assure you that the Devourer is not going to have *any* effect on me short of *maybe* a little heartburn. Okay?"

"Okay," Hazuki nodded, but there was more bothering her than that.

"If I'd thought about it, I'd have made an omelet out of him," Lilith considered. "Or better yet, let Eve use him to make some of her terrible hotcakes!"

"There's nothing wrong with her hotcakes," Hazuki muttered.

Lilith gave a long-suffering sigh. "Even when you're angry at her, you still won't admit that she can't cook worth a damn." Shaking her head, she turned to the next shelf and continued arranging books. "She wanted to come back to you, you know."

"As my daughter, I know."

"No, I tried to talk her out of that one first thing," Lilith said with an exaggerated shiver. "I mean after that. After we wrapped up that first set of mortal lives, we were going to come and check on you. She used to talk about it all the time: 'Oh, I hope Hazuki-chan and Chikaru-chan found one another. Do you think they fell in love? They deserve to be happy. Do you think they'll even want to see me again?' It was *incessant* sometimes."

Hazuki shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "She… wanted us to fall in love?"

"She wanted you to be *happy*," Lilith sighed. "And you are, aren't you? With the two of them? I was standing right there when you did the big erotic firework, remember?"

"For a while there, I was happier than I'd ever been," Hazuki whispered, feeling a mix of warmth and deep guilt at the thought. But it was true: happiness with Hatsumi, at least at the end, had always been accompanied by so much shame and regret. As complicated as things had become with Tamao and Chikaru, though, there had never been that same level of constant turmoil within herself. Loving them was *freeing* .

"And that was all her idea," Lilith nodded. "For the record, I wanted her to take your *Souma* and your memories after she spent that last night with you. I thought you'd be better off without the heartache." She paused and gave a small smile. "Like I said, I've never been happier that she didn't listen to me. You should be, too. She did all of it for you, and she went behind my back to do it. She *loves* you, Hazuki-chan. Probably more than she's ever loved a mortal."

Lilith returned to shelving books, leaving Hazuki silent, her mind spinning.

"It was very hard for her to let you go," the elder Keeper said at last, "but she'd do it all again if it could give you that happiness you were just telling me about."

"You've changed, Lilith," Hazuki said in an amazed whisper.

"Nah," Lilith grinned, waving it off. "I'm still the Magnificent Lilith-chan."

"Why did you think I'd enjoy getting to kill you?" Hazuki asked suddenly.

Lilith rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. You were never good at hiding your disdain for me, as much as I tried to overlook it."

"It wasn't you," Hazuki said uncomfortably. "It was the way you kept throwing yourself at me. But… I never *hated* you, and I certainly never wanted to *kill* you. I mean… you were the only friend I had for… it had to be close to a year, right?"

"In subjective time, our journey lasted three hundred forty-four days," Lilith nodded, looking Hazuki in the eye. "I'm acutely aware of the passage of time. Part of my job, you know."

Something hard flashed in Lilith's eyes, and suddenly Hazuki understood. "I was… I was *terrible* to you," she whispered. "You were lonely just like I was, weren't you?"

"Ten thousand years is a long time, Hazuki-chan," Lilith said softly. "Even for an immortal." She then made a face. "Still, I wasn't exactly subtle, was I?"

"No," Hazuki laughed. "No, you weren't. And I was pretty, um, focused."

"Yes," Lilith nodded. "Yes, you were."

They both laughed, then, the tension between them evaporating. "It meant a lot to me that you were there," Hazuki smiled. "I didn't realize it then, but it really helped to know that I wasn't alone. I wasn't good at showing it, but… I *did* care about you… and I still do."

"Just not enough to sleep with me," Lilith shrugged.

"Um, no."

"Only teasing," Lilith winked, then her grin deepened with mischief. "And anyway, you may have lost your chance now that there's someone else here who smells of Yamiyama…"

"I guess I understand now why Chikaru and Hazuki both freaked me out the way they did," Kaname said at length.

"Because they both reminded you of me," Eve nodded. "You felt their *Souma*, even if you didn't know what it was. And now you have it too."

"Can you… can you take it away?" Kaname asked with a grimace.

Eve gazed into the taller girl's eyes. "I could, but why?"

"It was fine when I had something to focus it on," Kaname sighed. "I mean, when there were dragons to kill and worlds to save, it was nice to have the boost. But… when I'm standing still, it's like there's this itch inside me that I can't scratch. What is it, anyway?"

"It's creation," Eve said simply. "The energy that gives life and form to the world, and the energy that protects it. Do you remember the first time we met, Kaname-chan?"

"I'll never forget it," Kaname whispered. "I still have dreams about it. Nightmares, really."

"Sit with me a moment, Kaname-chan," Eve smiled, taking both of the other girl's hands and guiding her to the floor, where they sat facing one another, hands still joined.

"I felt it then," Kaname said quietly. "It scared me, though."

"And yet you were drawn to it, first in me and then in my sisters."

"Why?" Kaname sighed, her voice filled with frustration.

"I can tell you what I think," Eve mused. "I think you've been waiting a long time, hoping for someone to re-create you. Someone to forgive you."

"I don't need to be forgiven," Kaname said, automatically, but as she felt Eve's energy flowing through her, just as it had that day, she felt her nerve wavering.

"So you told me once," Eve whispered. "But you know better, don't you?"

Kaname could not find her voice, so Eve went on. "What they… did to you, Kaname-chan, when you were a child… I wish I could take that away. I wish I could change time so they never hurt you the way they did. But what happened was not your fault, as much as part of you believes this to be true. Deep down, you feel tainted, when the truth is that you *don't* need to be forgiven. Not for this. Not for being a helpless child betrayed so horribly by the ones she trusted most."

Tears streamed down Kaname's cheeks as something inside her unclenched at the touch of Eve's *Souma* . Something she had not allowed at that first fateful meeting in the gazebo outside Strawberry Hall.

"Part of you realized the truth of this," Eve continued, "and it became your mantra. *I don't need to be forgiven* . But your heart never believed that, did it?"

"No," Kaname choked, shaking her head slowly.

"And you've let that change you. Denying forgiveness, and yet wanting it so badly, you've gone on to do things, haven't you? The older you've grown, the more you've allowed yourself to become like them. Are you truly so desperate to be forgiven that you'll allow yourself to continue hurting others until someone comes along to remake you?"

There were no words by this time: only sobs of regret and release, and Eve gripped Kaname's hands tightly. "I wish I could have shown you then, Kaname-chan. The power to remake yourself has been inside you all along. Can you forgive me for not finishing what I started that day?"

"Can you forgive me for not letting you?" Kaname asked in a tiny constricted voice. Through her tears, she could see Eve smiling at her, just as Naoko-sama had done that first day: the day Kaname

had felt that warmth and green and wholeness that she never believed could be hers. And yet here it was inside her, shedding light on the darkest places, and bringing life to the cold, dead center of her heart.

Eve held Kaname tightly against her as the taller girl broke down in new sobs, finally facing the demons that had been forced upon her, as well as the ones she'd brought on herself. There would be work to do, Kaname realized, and it was going to be neither easy nor pleasant. But for the first time in her life, in the arms of this angel, she truly believed that forgiveness could be real. Even for her.

"Okay, now this is the fun part," Lilith smiled as she held the shredded book between them. "Put your hands on the top cover. We're not going to go into the story with our whole selves: we're just going to sort of think our way into it, so that we can put all the pieces back together."

Tamao nodded, placing both palms against the book. She had noticed the tiniest hum as she'd carried it through the library looking for Lilith, but it still didn't seem to be alive, at least not like the others. "If Eve brought Ryofu back to life, shouldn't time have started in this world already?"

"Already learning the rules of the game, eh?" Lilith winked. "You're good, all right. I wish I could keep you around for a while longer. But no, Ryofu isn't quite alive yet. I mean, she's *healed*, but since the damage has already been done to this world, I need to kick-start things to get time moving again. Are you ready?"

"Ready," Tamao nodded.

There was a rush of *Souma* between them, and then Tamao could all but feel the story re-forming around her.

The dragon's snort of satisfaction lasted only for a moment, because quite suddenly, there was something moving beneath its claws. To its

alarm, the Souma-bearer was pushing back, and somehow this tiny human was strong enough to wrench the claw off of herself, even though the dragon was using all its weight and muscle to pin her to the ground. At last, to its own astonishment, the beast found itself thrown backward almost twice its own length. How could something so small, that had been so helpless moments ago, have done it?

" *That hurt," Ryofu said in a quiet voice. "You're not very nice, are you?"*

Desperate to complete its mission, the dragon charged the tiny figure, but Ryofu had already retrieved her naginata from where it had fallen. There was a blur of motion, and the dragon's head fell to the ground even as the rest of its body tumbled to a halt beside it.

" *What was that all about?" Ryofu wondered aloud. Then, deciding it was no longer worth the effort to consider, she flipped her blade onto her shoulder and continued on her way.*

"And that's that," Lilith said merrily, and when Tamao opened her eyes, she saw the book sitting whole and undamaged in their hands.

"Amazing," Tamao whispered. "You fixed it as easily as that?"

Lilith stuck out her tongue as she put the book under one arm and led Tamao back to the section in which it belonged. "Don't short yourself: you helped."

"I did?"

"Sure you did. Like I said before, you're obviously a natural. I was surprised at first when it was *you* reaching out to me from the library, but it made sense, really, from what I know about you."

"But we just met," Tamao said, furrowing her brow at the Keeper.

"Sort of," Lilith smirked. "I went to school with another you. I used to love listening to your poetry: you were a creator of worlds even

then."

Even though she knew she probably shouldn't, Tamao couldn't resist asking. "Lilith-sama, in that world… was I happy?"

"You always seemed to be," Lilith grinned. "We were roommates from our first year at Miator."

"Oh! Were we… good friends?"

"Mmm, the best," Lilith smirked, but then she hurriedly composed herself and cleared her throat as Tamao's face flushed. "So! Yeah, it's kind of a shame that your native world has as little inherent magic as it does: in another place, you could probably be quite a sorceress."

"There are worlds with magic?" Tamao considered for a moment, looking around the endless shelves. "Hmm, I suppose there would have to be, with this many to choose from."

"Then again, that's not all it's cracked up to be either," Lilith waved. "Tends to corrupt you unless you have proper balance. And balance shouldn't be a problem for you, especially with both Chikaru and Hazuki around."

"What do you mean?" Tamao asked. "What do they have to do with it?"

"Lots," Lilith shrugged. "You see, together the three of you cover all three aspects of creation: worlds, lives and the strength to protect it. You're a complete circle, the three of you. I envy you, really."

"I wonder if it'll ever stop being confusing, though," Tamao sighed.

Again, Lilith waved one hand dismissively. "That's one of the things I don't get about humans: you're so obsessed with duality. Don't you know that some of the best things in creation come in threes?"

"I missed you, onee-chan," Chikaru whispered as she joined hands with Eve and felt their energies mingle.

"I couldn't be more proud of you," Eve smiled at the girl kneeling opposite her. "You've come so far, and done so much good. I'm so glad you found me before I left your world."

"It was all for you," Chikaru nodded. "You've always been my inspiration. You brought good to every life you touched."

"You flatter me," said Eve, and now the smile was tinged with sadness. "But I don't deserve your praise. There are some lives I've only hurt. Even yours, I think."

"How could you have ever hurt me?" Chikaru asked.

Eve closed her eyes for a moment. "You know how. You've been waiting to ask me."

Chikaru studied her angel's face for a moment, then nodded slowly. "I was never good at hiding things from you, was I?"

"Ask me, then."

After a deep breath, Chikaru did so. "Why am I celibate? I thought it was part of the way *Souma* affects me, but after talking to Lilith earlier, I'm not so sure."

Eve put her head to one side and considered her once-sister. "Your *Souma* is like mine. There's no reason it should have such an effect on you."

"But… but *you* were celibate, and I wanted to be like you."

"I was by *choice*, yes. But Chi-chan, in a very real sense, I'm a fertility goddess. Why would I ever ask someone to abstain for *my* sake?"

Chikaru blinked twice, then found herself making an uncomfortable conclusion. "Then… why did you make that choice? As a fertility goddess, do you disapprove of homosexual relationships?" She could scarcely believe it, especially after Shizuma and Kaori.

"Love is love," Eve sighed, rolling her eyes. "Where there is love, there will be bonds. Where there are bonds, there will be families, and where there are families there will be homes, and in many cases children to be cared for, one way or another."

"But you never took a lover," Chikaru insisted. "Lord knows you had chances, too, but you never had so much as a single kiss… at least one that wasn't forced on you. I… *aspired* to that. I wanted to help others find themselves and find love, and… somewhere along the line, I stopped wanting it for myself. But I didn't care, because I thought I was becoming more like you."

Eve closed her eyes and let out a long sigh. "I've left another mess, haven't I?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm so sorry, little sister," Eve whispered, shaking her head. "You really *don't* know why I never took a lover while I lived in your world, do you?"

"I don't."

"No, I imagine you wouldn't, because the story wouldn't mean anything to you until now. I can tell you why, but… I'm not sure Hazuki-chan should know this yet. I've already hurt her enough."

"How does it involve her?" Chikaru asked. "Apart from the way she feels about me?"

Eve took a long breath to steady herself, and for a moment, Chikaru found herself amused to see this gesture she herself had made so many times. No secret where she'd learned that.

"I believe Hazuki-chan thinks that my life with her was one of the very last mortal lives I lived, if not *the* last, before she found me again. But the truth is, my life with her was one of the *first* . It's hard to explain without going deep into the relationship between subjective time and library time and book time, but the fact is, I lived hundreds of lives after I knew her. So when I was Azuma Hatsumi, the experience of being mortal was still something exciting and forbidden, and I reveled in it. There were boys to kiss and dates to go on, and… a little sister to fall in love with."

"You were in love with her?" Chikaru whispered.

"Yes, and that was something very unexpected. I'd never met anyone like her in the few worlds I'd traveled to that point. I wrote her anonymous letters proclaiming my love for her, but I realized I could never love her the way she deserved. I would be leaving her soon enough, and so I kept my distance from her, and buried myself in frivolous bonds with our schoolmates." Eve looked down into her lap. "She was always so protective of me, but I was so wrapped up in my own mortal freedom that I didn't recognize her concern for what it was until my very last day with her. She loved me, too."

"Very deeply," Chikaru nodded. "I could tell the day I met her. As much as it was killing her, she loved you."

"And it is to my eternal shame that I never realized until then that she loved me as more than a sister," Eve whispered. "I moved on from her world… and eventually I allowed myself to let go of the memory of her. It wasn't until hundreds of lives later, when I met her again in the Universal Garden, that I truly understood how deeply her emotions ran, and what she had gone through to be with me again. By then, though, it was far too late."

She paused, but Chikaru said nothing, as she was already beginning to see how the pieces fit together.

"Before that, when I lived with you," Eve went on, "I was much older, if you will, though I hesitate to say wiser. But I knew better than to

have mortal lovers by then. I still vividly remembered the look on Hazuki-chan's face when I disappeared just as she tried to kiss me. I could never allow myself to hurt someone so dear to me again. And so you see, little sister, the real reason Minamoto Naoko was celibate was… because of Hazuki-chan."

Chikaru closed her eyes and let her head drop. "Layers… upon *layers*… of irony."

"I was so happy when I learned Hazuki-chan had met you on her journey, and had returned to yours, of all worlds. I so hoped that these two dear sisters of mine would find a home in one another's hearts."

"That, at least, we have," Chikaru smiled wryly. "And there have been days when I wished I could just kiss her and let the rest come naturally, but… it doesn't come naturally to me. Not anymore."

"I've done you great harm," Eve said in a desolate tone.

"But… you haven't," Chikaru replied, shaking her head. "I mean, if it's not the *Souma* doing it, and it's not some kind of supernatural whammy you put on me, then… good Lord, did I do it to myself?"

"It's possible that you did," Eve admitted.

"I guess the big question is whether or not I can undo it?"

"I wish I could answer that…"

By this time Kaname had lost track of how many floors of the library she'd walked, or how many shelves full of worlds she'd passed. Her head was still spinning.

She literally could not bring herself to sit still. There was so much to do. People she needed to talk with. How could she stand around doing nothing with all this waiting for her?

At last, she paused for breath, leaned against one of the bookcases for support, and wondered for the millionth time if all of that had actually just happened.

There came the sound of someone politely clearing her throat, and when Kaname looked over, she saw Lilith standing there. The Keeper had her hair down, and her ruffled dress shirt was unbuttoned almost to the navel. She had both hands clasped behind her back, and she was giving Kaname a smile not unlike the one she'd given to the egg of the Devourer just before she'd swallowed it.

"Hi there," she said, simply.

When Hazuki found Eve at last, the younger Keeper was sitting on one of the railings of the atrium, dangling her legs into the empty space beneath. Hazuki carefully swung her legs over the rail to join her.

"I think I understand now," she said.

Eve looked at her, but said nothing. Her face was filled with shame, and Hazuki had to look away, already regretting the harshness of her earlier words.

"I finally put my finger on what's so different about Lilith. She… grew up."

"That's one way of looking at it," Eve agreed.

"This was never about *you* at all, was it? That's what you were trying to tell me. This last trip into a mortal world was for your sister, to give her a chance to grow up again."

"Lilith isn't my sister," Eve whispered. "I mean, she is in a sense, and we call each other by that name, but she's also my wife and my lover and my friend, and she's the only one in all creation like me. These worlds around you are our children. And as much as I hurt you,

Hazuki-chan, I hurt her too, and I had to make things right with her before I could do anything else. You saw what my selfishness did to her." Those remarkable eyes were downcast, now, filled with pain and regret. "You're right: I've left a lot of messes behind, including right here in my own home."

"Did she ask you to come with her?" Hazuki asked then.

"I didn't give her the chance. I didn't want to send her alone into a world after everything I'd put her through. But at the same time… yes, I wanted another chance for myself, to share this experience with her. And I misjudged the danger, and…" She trailed off, then gathered herself to continue. "It won't happen again. If it is her wish to continue living mortal lives without me, then I will give Lilith my blessing, but I'll stay here. I've been a failure as a Keeper. Loneliness is the very least I deserve after everything I did to her… and everything I did to my mortal sisters."

Hazuki gave a small chuckle. "After all this time, you still don't know how to think like a mortal, do you?"

Eve cocked her head toward the other girl. "Hazuki-chan?"

"You don't have to be lonely for eternity," Hazuki smiled. "You have all of us, you know."

For a moment, Eve looked confused, but then her face fell. "Hazuki-chan, I would never ask any of you to stay here with me. And… I couldn't even if I wanted to. One of my duties as Keeper is to keep mortals out of the library. I daresay it's a rule we've had to let slip of late, but…"

"I wasn't talking about staying forever," Hazuki said gently. "You were right, you know… I *didn't* fall in love with you again."

"I'm glad," Eve nodded. "I'm glad you were able to move on."

"But even then, you're still Hatsumi to me, and you're still Naoko to them, and whatever you were to Kaori and who knows how many more?"

Eve looked down into the darkness of the atrium. "What are you saying, Hazuki-chan?"

"Well, if I remember correctly, this place has the most *amazing* collection of tea: maybe you could have your sisters over for a cup once in a while, to help kick the boredom?"

"You… you would do that for me?" Eve whispered, her carnelian eyes filling with tears. "After everything I've done?"

"Of course I would," Hazuki breathed. "Whatever else you've been to me, you're still my onee-chan, and I'll always, *always* love you."

Even balanced as precariously as they were, Hazuki soon found herself with the head of a weeping angel in her lap. She gently stroked Eve's hair, remembering a time not so long ago in the Universal Garden, when their roles had been reversed.

After a long while, she realized they were not alone. Looking back, she saw Chikaru and Tamao, along with a somewhat disheveled Kaname and Lilith, standing close by. "Is it time?" she asked.

"All that's left is to finish the job on your book," Lilith nodded, indicating the still damaged volume held by Tamao.

Hazuki swung herself back to the floor, then helped Eve down from the railing as well. "Then let's go home," she said quietly.

There was a whirlwind of noise and sensation, and then silence. Shizuma looked up from the girl in her arms to see the world suddenly whole and filled with color again, with the once fractured sky an unmarred blue above them. "Nagisa," she whispered.

Her fiancee looked up wonderingly into her eyes, then at the restored tranquility of morning over the equestrian range. "What happened?" she asked in a tiny voice.

"I don't know, but I think it's over," Shizuma said softly. She looked to the side to see Hikari stirring in Amane's arms, then out at the field where the body of the dragon still lay, and finally at the spot of emptiness where the other four had vanished moments before.

But soon it was no longer emptiness, as the area once more filled with green, and then, with another rush of sound, the light coalesced into five human shapes.

" *Tamao-chan!"* Nagisa cried, then dashed forward to hug her roommate. Shizuma was a step behind, her eyes widening as she recognized the new face among them. "Naoko-sama," she whispered, throwing her arms around the slight figure of her long-departed friend. Amane and Hikari followed soon after, and before long there was a huge tangle of hugs, kisses and sheer relief where moments ago there had been only empty air.

"What happened?" Amane whispered, looking from Kaname to Hazuki. "Where did you go?"

"It's a very long story," Hazuki nodded, impulsively hugging the Etoile.

"I can't stay long, but with any luck, I'll be able to shed some light on things before I have to leave again," Naoko said softly, causing Shizuma to gasp. She could talk?

Hazuki nodded, turning her exhausted eyes on Shizuma. "Like I said, it's a very long story. But everything's going to be back to normal now."

"Almost everything," Kaname said, looking out across the field.

Shizuma followed the Spica president's gaze, to where the dragon was still oozing into the dirt.

"I think we may have a hard time explaining *that* to the groundskeepers," Kaname elaborated.

"Hmm," Chikaru pondered. "Maybe we could dig a big hole, have some of the horses drag it over, bury it, and let future paleontologists figure it out?"

"I don't know, I'd kind of like to get a jacket made out of it," Kaname considered.

Before anyone else could say anything, a soft glow came over the dragon's corpse, and then with a flash, it was gone.

"Thaaaank you, Lilith!" Hazuki called heavenward.

Trying very hard to keep her thoughts rational in the wake of all she had just seen, Shizuma looked first at Tamao, then back to Naoko, then at Hazuki. "So. A long story, is it?"

"Can we go back to the dorm first?" Chikaru smiled. "All of a sudden I'm dying for a mug of tea."

Next: Trinity

Trinity

Oh how I wish I were a trinity, so if I lost a part of me

I'd still have two of the same to live

But nobody gets a lifetime rehearsal, as specks of dust we're universal

To let this love survive would be the greatest gift that we could give

-Indigo Girls

Part 23: Trinity

As could be expected, the story required much of the day, along with a lot of tea.

They wound up telling the story in the Miator lounge, which was thankfully deserted, affording them the privacy they needed. Hazuki was content to allow Eve to do most of the heavy lifting in terms of telling the metaphysics of the story, and while Eve did not go into extensive detail about some things, she was surprisingly frank about others. She introduced herself to the other four as one of the guardians of all creation, who had lived among them for a short mortal space before moving on to the next world. Hazuki's status as a visitor turned resident of this world was laid out for all to see. And while some of the reasons for the difficulty with the dragons were glossed over, she was very plain that Hazuki, Chikaru, Tamao and Kaname had been called to protect them all in a time of great need.

As could also be expected, reactions from those originally left behind on the equestrian range varied between stunned and amazed, but Hazuki noticed the way Eve made a point to involve them all, and to

make physical contact with each of them at various times during the telling of the tale. There was a lot of *Souma* moving in the room: Eve was no doubt using her energy to add weight to her words, as well as to soothe their apprehensions in the presence of something so far removed from the reality they all knew.

What Hazuki would not have expected, though, was the fact that Hikari was the one who asked the most questions, and seemed the most enthralled by the tale. While Amane had shown interest in the idea of another Astraea, Shizuma was deeply moved by the knowledge of the other Kaori, and Nagisa was amazed at the part in which Tamao had helped heal the damaged world, it was the younger Etoile who wanted to know more about things like the Library and the role of the Keepers. Although it was clear that none of the listeners could truly disbelieve the story, given all they had just seen and experienced, it was Hikari who seemed to to want to know it all.

Kaname had spent much of the time pacing, occasionally adding curt details at Hazuki's request regarding the final battle with the dragons, but eventually, she could stand it no longer, and she stood before Hikari and offered her hand. "Etoile-sama, may I please speak to you in private?"

For a moment it looked as though Amane wanted to protest, but Hikari gave her partner a reassuring look as she stood to take the offered hand. "Of course, Kenjyo-san."

As the two left the room, Tamao sat up from where she'd been lounging against Chikaru and gasped. "Your trip," she said to Nagisa and Shizuma. "Have you missed your flight?

Shizuma consulted her watch. "Hmm, it appears we have. Ah, well."

"Sorry about that," Hazuki sighed.

"There will be other flights," Shizuma waved.

"It seems strange to think about going away on a trip after everything that happened this morning," Nagisa added. "It's like I don't know what gets to happen next after hearing all of this."

"I think you should go on your trip," Chikaru smiled. "I think the best thing any of us can do right now is get on with what we were doing and live the lives we were meant to."

"Can we, though?" Amane asked quietly. "Is everything really back to normal now?"

"Apart from knowing what you know, yes," Eve nodded. "The danger has passed, and if I have anything to say about it, your world will never again know its like." She smiled faintly at Hazuki. "And none of my sisters should ever be forced into these roles again."

"I'm having tea with people who saved the universe," Nagisa snorted, shaking her head even as she said it. "My *roommate* helped save the universe."

"Purely by accident, Nagisa-chan," Tamao assured her.

At that moment, they were rejoined by Kaname and Hikari, who were still holding hands. The young Etoile was smiling serenely, and Kaname was busily rubbing tears from her eyes. Hazuki could not help but smile at the sight. Hikari had been the only one to have faith in Kaname's ability to change: it was only fair that she should be the first to see that change at work after their return.

"I hope it's clear enough to all of you that this story was for your ears only," Eve said. "If any of you wish, I could make you forget, but I believe it's only fair that you have the chance to know what happened today."

"I'll probably forget it all by morning just out of self-defense," Amane chuckled as Hikari returned to the couch beside her.

"It's going to be strange rooming with someone who can save worlds," Nagisa admitted.

"I haven't changed, Nagisa-chan," Tamao whispered. She had, of course, and Hazuki knew that as well as anyone, but it still warmed her heart to see Tamao reach out to her friend in the wake of everything.

"Naoko-sama, it was an honor to know you when you lived with us," Shizuma said to the Keeper, "and in a way, it's nice to finally know why you were as… *exceptional* as you were. It's humbling to think that someone like you called me a friend."

"The dearest of friends, Shizuma-chan," Eve smiled.

"I, for one, *never* want to forget you. But… as much of a miracle as it is to see you again now, will this be the last time?"

Eve looked fondly at the cuddled pair of Shizuma and Nagisa. "I don't think it will. If nothing else, it would be an honor to attend your wedding when the time comes."

Shizuma's next words came with difficulty. "It's wonderful to think that there's a world like our own where Kaori will have the chance to lead a long and happy life. Thank you for… taking care of *our* Kaori while you were with us, as well. They always said it was a miracle that she survived as long as she did, but… with you as her inspiration, I suppose a miracle wasn't out of the question."

"I wish I could have done more," Eve whispered, closing her eyes. Hazuki found herself wondering how many such wishes Eve had: how many lives had she *not* been allowed to save during her walks through the mortal worlds?

"No regrets," Shizuma smiled softly, squeezing Nagisa's hand. "I know she left us at peace."

"She did," Eve nodded to the silver-haired girl. She then looked around the room, meeting each pair of eyes in turn. "My time is short. Would my dear ones do me the honor of accompanying me to my favorite tree?"

Eve left the world in the same place she had three years before, but this time in the company of more than just the one sister. She took the time to bid each of the eight goodbye with an embrace (even Nagisa, whom she was meeting for the first time), then she called for Ken-chan. The parakeet popped into the world beside her, briefly gaped at the "smorgasbord of beauty" he found before him, and then both of them were gone in a flash of green, but not before Eve promised to let Hazuki know as soon as things had calmed down enough for that first tea party.

Lacking much else to say in the wake of the incredible day, they wished one another good evening and began to trickle back to the dormitory in smaller groups. Shizuma and Nagisa walked hand-in-hand, discussing revised travel plans and wedding dates. Amane and Hikari were as silently affectionate as always, the smaller Etoile leaning on her partner as they walked each with an arm around the other.

Hazuki and Tamao started back with Chikaru very intentionally between them, but Kaname remained apart from each of the smaller groups, walking back toward the dormitory grounds alone. "Can I meet you two in a little bit?" Hazuki said to the others.

"We can go to my room," Chikaru nodded. "Once more give the newly engaged their space, and all that."

"I'll be there," she smiled, then gave each of them a kiss on the cheek before hurrying after Kaname.

She caught up with her council president at the entrance to the dormitory, and while Kaname acknowledged the other samurai's

presence with a nod, she said nothing. They shared a companionable silence as they walked to the Spica wing together.

"Are you okay?" Hazuki asked at last, when they arrived at the door to Kaname's room.

"I don't know yet," Kaname admitted. "I think it's going to take a while for the shock to wear off. This was *not* how I expected this day to go *at all* ."

"You know… you don't need to be alone tonight," Hazuki said. As Kaname raised an eyebrow at her, she quickly amended herself. "And I think you know that I don't mean that as a come-on."

"You disappoint me," Kaname smirked.

"Seriously, though. You've got something inside you now that we can help you understand. If you need anything from me, it's yours. I'm sure Chikaru will say the same. Hell, by morning she'll probably be asking you whether or not you want to learn meditation with us."

"I don't know. But I *am* looking forward to a good spar sometime."

"We'll have to work it into our schedules," Hazuki laughed softly.

"Thanks," Kaname nodded, her voice as close to gentle as Hazuki had ever heard it. "I think I need to be alone tonight, though. If nothing else, I need to start my list of all the people I need to apologize to. Having a conscience is going to be a bitch, isn't it?"

"Probably."

Kaname chewed on her lower lip for a moment, then looked up at Hazuki. "I'm the one who stole your sword registration and tried to get you arrested."

Hazuki paused at the pointblank manner in which it was said, then nodded. "I thought as much, to be honest."

"I was afraid of you," Kaname went on. "I was afraid of this *Souma* thing, because… I guess it reminded me of Naoko-sama, and things I wasn't ready to face. So I tried to get rid of you. It was petty and inexcusable, and… I'm sorry."

"No harm done in the end," Hazuki nodded, "so apology accepted. If you still have it, though, I'd like it back: I hate not having a backup copy."

"I'll get it back to you."

"And that was very well done," Hazuki said with the trace of a smirk on her face. "You'll have the hang of this apologizing thing in no time."

Kaname rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, I've got the rest of the break to figure out a way to tell Momomi I cheated on her."

"I was afraid of that," Hazuki sighed. "I'm sorry; I should have warned you about Lilith. She can be incredibly… persistent. Not to say persuasive."

"She was, but… I could have said no." Kaname looked pointedly away from Hazuki and went on. "Anyway, she's cheated on me, too, and the way things have been with us, it'll probably just be another mark in the debit column of our relationship."

"I'm sorry," Hazuki said again, but this time she was less surprised by how much she meant it.

Kaname nodded and turned back to Hazuki. After an obvious moment of internal struggle, she gingerly reached out with both arms, and Hazuki finished the gesture for her by embracing her fiercely.

"It *has* been an honor," Kaname whispered roughly.

"It has indeed," Hazuki agreed.

They stood like that for a long while, then Kaname patted the other girl roughly on the back a few times before releasing her. "Go take care of your threesome," she smiled slyly.

"I will. Knock if you need us for anything. Well… *almost* anything."

Without another word, Kaname unlocked her door and went inside her room. Once the door was latched behind her, Hazuki went back to her own room to pick up her pajamas. To her surprise, she caught a glint of silver on her desk as she turned on the overhead light, and on closer inspection, she smiled as she recognized a familiar letter-opener.

A note attached read:

Dear Hazuki-chan: Found this during clean-up, and thought you might like it back. See you soon! XOXO, Lilith

---

Tamao watched as Chikaru kicked off her shoes and collapsed dramatically onto her bed. "One of things you'll learn about *Souma* is that you don't need to sleep very much at all," she said, "but I think tonight I'm going to make an exception. It's been a full day."

"It has," Tamao agreed, slipping off her own shoes and sitting up on the mattress. She could not find it in herself to be as relaxed as the other girl, though. "Chikaru..?"

"Hmm?"

Unable to meet her eyes, Tamao instead took a look around the room, taking in the quantities of handmade crafts, watercolors, dresses and costume pieces in various stages of completion: all the outward signs of the incredible person who lived in this room. The person she had nearly lost, and was afraid that she might still. "You died today," Tamao whispered.

"Not for very long," Chikaru reminded her. "You helped see to that, remember?"

"But… you were ready to sacrifice yourself for us."

"And I'd do it again."

"Yes, and that's what scares me," Tamao sighed. "Sacrificing yourself for others seems to come a little *too* naturally to you."

Chikaru furrowed her brow at Tamao for a moment, then nodded. "Ah, we're not just talking about my little experiment with haberdashery, then?"

Tamao scooted herself up the rest of the way onto the bed, then sat opposite Chikaru, tucking her legs beneath her. "You're planning to leave us, aren't you?"

"Of course not," Chikaru immediately denied, but then her expression grew more pensive. "It's just that… well, I *will* be leaving for University at the end of the next semester. We'll have to be apart then."

"For what? One year out of the hundreds more that we have left?"

"And it's not as though you'd be alone," Chikaru went on. "Hazuki can share everything with you now. There's more I can teach you about your energy, of course, but once you know that, the two of you will have everything you need."

" *No we won't!"* Tamao cried. "Is that all you think you are to me? Just someone to teach me the basics so I can move on to someone else?"

"Tamao-chan…"

"I *love* you," Tamao insisted. "I love *both* of you, and I *know* you feel the same about us. Chikaru, I held your *soul* inside me, and even with the end of the world literally breathing down our necks, I felt

something so pure and so beautiful when our energy touched. I felt the way you hold Hazuki in your heart, and it was… my God, it was awe-inspiring. And I felt the way you held me, too, even before I became more like you: I *know* you love me."

"Of course I do," Chikaru whispered, closing her eyes. "I have ever since the day of the Etoile election, when I saw you doing what I've always done: putting the ones dearest to you above yourself. But you took it a step further: you sacrificed something very real for Nagisa's happiness, and that made it even more incredible to me. I think if I had been capable of doing so, I would have fallen in love with you that day. Even later that night, when you were crying in my lap, there was a part of me that wished I could just kiss the hurt away."

"And Hazuki?"

"Much the same," Chikaru nodded. "I've tried to want her more times than I can count, but something inside always stopped me."

"Your celibacy," Tamao nodded. "Is… is all of this about sex, then? Do you think you don't deserve us because you don't want to have sex with us?"

"It's been… a barrier," Chikaru admitted.

Tamao reached forward to take one of Chikaru's hands, marveling at the motion of energy when they touched. "It doesn't need to be. We have *this* . Isn't this better than sex, really?"

"I don't think we're either of us qualified to make that call," Chikaru snorted, an amused grin crossing her face.

To Tamao's surprise, a third voice suddenly joined in from the vicinity of the door. "Well, I know which of the two *I'd* prefer if push came to shove."

They both looked around to see Hazuki standing just inside the room, having arrived so quietly that neither of them had noticed. She paused to remove her shoes as well, then joined them on the bed. "We've never really had the chance to talk about this with all three of us, have we?"

"No, I suppose we haven't," Chikaru said with a wan smile. She then straightened up, took a deep breath, and looked from one of them to the other. "Tamao-chan, Hazuki-chan, I love you both. Along with that, I love what the two of you have together. But for me, this has always been the time I've backed away and let the others have their well-deserved happiness."

"You deserve--" Tamao began, but Chikaru held up a hand to indicate that she was not finished.

"This time… I don't *want* to," she went on, and a glimmer of tears began to form in her eyes. "I want us to be able to stay here in this room and sleep in a big pile together for the rest of our lives. I don't want a day to go by without feeling your energy inside me. But the truth is, I'm scared."

"You don't have to be scared," Hazuki assured her. "You are what you are, and I've always accepted that. You just have one little boundary, and in the end it really is just that. One *little* boundary. And you can't help that."

"Funny you should mention that," Chikaru sighed. "As it happens, I've just discovered that my lack of a sex drive has nothing to do with my *Souma*, and has nothing to do with anything Eve did to me. It was my own invention all along."

Tamao's mouth made a small "o" of surprise, and she exchanged confused looks with Hazuki as they waited for her to continue.

"You see, there was something else that happened at right around the same time that Eve left and I found myself with this energy inside me. We lost Kaori-sama. What Shizuma said earlier today is what

I've believed all along: it was Naoko's presence that allowed her to live as long as she did. And when she died… I saw what it did to Shizuma. I saw the light go out of those eyes, and the beauty drain from that face. And with these new senses that I didn't understand yet, I felt her pain -- truly *felt* it, inside me. And it terrified me to see this darker side to falling in love: the desolation that its loss could bring to a heart so filled with light."

"And you never wanted it to happen to you," Tamao finished for her.

"It's probably not as easy as that," Chikaru sighed, "but that's all I've been able to come up with in the time since I found out. Maybe not-quite-fourteen me made the connection that sex was the final Little Boundary, so wanting sex was tantamount to wanting to open yourself up to that hurt. Maybe I… re-made myself into someone who didn't want that level of intimacy, just for my own protection, and I used the excuse that I was becoming more like my angel. And maybe I'm still holding back because deep down, I'm afraid of becoming just like Shizuma was when she lost Kaori." She then closed her eyes and shook her head. "Which is stupid, really, because I'm close enough to both of you now that losing you would be…"

"Then why push us away?" Tamao asked quietly when Chikaru could not finish the thought.

"I need you both to promise me something," Chikaru whispered. "If we're truly going to consider the idea of being a loving… *three*… don't you *dare* hold anything back from one another on my account. I've seen the kisses. I've seen the fondles when you think I'm not looking. I've seen the desire you have for one another. Don't hold back, please. Just… give me fair warning so I can plug my astral ears and give you your privacy?"

"Chikaru," Tamao began, but then she paused to take Hazuki's hand and look into those blue eyes for a moment, gathering her nerve. "Chikaru, may… may *we* kiss you?"

The Lulim president smiled, but shook her head. "I'm sorry, Tamao-chan. But this time it's because *I'd* be the confused one. I have a lot of work to do, and I think most of it is something I have to do on my own. Maybe eventually I can think my way back out of this thing I've thought myself into."

"We've got time," Hazuki reminded her. "We've got the rest of our lives."

"I know," Chikaru nodded. "But please don't hope for too much. The last time I remember having a sexuality at all, I'm pretty sure I self-identified as straight. Maybe I'm further up the Kinsey scale than I knew, and maybe I'm not. But the honest truth is that I may not *ever* be able to share that with you. God help me, I might actually want a man in my life at some point."

"Well then," Tamao said with a grin that was equal parts mischief and relief, "whoever he is, I hope he can handle having *us* around, because *we're* not going anywhere."

"I have an idea," Hazuki said with a smile. "Let's all just take a breath and bear in mind that we helped save creation today, and if anyone deserves a nice, long cuddle and nap after all that, it's us. We don't have to figure it all out tonight. All I know is that I have the chance now to share a long, long life with both of you, and I want that if you'll have me. We've got time to work out the details later."

"Hmm, funny time for a marriage proposal," Chikaru winked.

"Another detail we don't have to figure out tonight," Hazuki nodded. "Right now all I want are pajamas, cuddles and sleep. Not necessarily in that order."

Minutes later, cuddling had indeed been achieved, this time with Chikaru in the coveted middle spot. *Souma* spread from one of them to another, feeling not unlike a warm wind. Perhaps, Hazuki wondered, this was how it felt to Tamao? Water, wind, and fireflies.

"I wonder what I'm going to say when people ask me how I spent my summer break?" Chikaru asked in a sleepy voice.

"I wonder what I'm going to say when I see my parents next week?" Hazuki snorted.

"That's true, you're going home to see them soon, aren't you?"

"Hmm. Got to show them they're getting their money's worth from this education, I suppose. How about you, Tamao-chan? You'll be going home next week as well, right?"

Tamao lifted her head from Chikaru's shoulder, and even in the relative darkness of the room, Hazuki could see that her eyes were shining. "I *am* home," she said in a happy whisper.

Deciding mutually that there was nothing more to add, the three women drifted off to sleep in one another's arms.

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After the battle and we're still around

Everything once up in the air has settled down

Sweep the ashes, let the silence find us

A moment of peace is worth every war behind us

-Indigo Girls

Next: Epilogue

Epilogue and Author's Notes

Well I don't know where it all begins

And I don't know where it all will end

But we're better off for all that we let in

-Indigo Girls

Epilogue

Graduation came with all the ceremony and pageantry that students of the Astraea academies had come to expect. Speeches were made by Etoile, administrators and representatives of the three schools' graduating classes, honors were bestowed, and another group of girls was ushered into life outside the hallowed halls. It was a day of cheers as well as tears, of proud families and relieved instructors.

To Kizuna and Remon, however, it was the single worst day their young lives had ever known.

"What will we do without you, Chikaru-onee-sama?" Kizuna sobbed against her former school president's dress.

"You'll be wonderful, my dears, Chikaru whispered to her as she took both girls in her arms while Kagome stood close by and watched. "I have high hopes for you: perhaps next year we'll see St. Lulim's first Etoile in a generation."

"Do you really think so?" Remon sniffed.

"I do. You'll keep the clubs running, then?"

"Of course," Kizuna replied.

"You'll keep the pride of St. Lulim alive and well?"

"We'll try," Remon nodded.

"And if things get too unbearably sad at any time, you'll let Hazuki-chan and Tamao-chan take care of you in my absence?"

" *Hai,"* they said together.

"That's what I needed to hear. Now, gather around, all three of you. I have something important to pass on to you before I leave these halls."

With the three underclassmen in a close circle around her, Chikaru reached into her pocket and produced a beautiful antique comb. "This belonged to my sister Naoko," she told them, "who has long been my inspiration, just as I've always hoped to be yours. I'm entrusting you with this, so that she can always remain a part of St. Lulim. Kagome-chan, I'll leave this in your care. Let her spirit guide you, and when the time comes for you to graduate, pass this on to a worthy successor."

Kagome nodded solemnly, accepting the comb from Chikaru with both hands. "Thank you, Chikaru-sama," she said quietly. She then studied it carefully. "It's… green," she then added in an even softer voice. "Just like you."

"Um, Kagome, sweetheart, it kind of looks *red* to me," Kizuna pointed out.

Chikaru, however, only nodded at her young charge, not surprised at all to know that she somehow understood. "I think I'm leaving it in good hands, my darlings. Meanwhile, please keep me in your hearts."

"Always," Remon whispered, as the three younger girls piled onto their former president in a final desperate hug.

Hazuki watched the Lulim girls' exchange from a distance, and then drifted off to people-watch some more while she waited for Tamao's duties to be complete. Suddenly, amidst the crowds, she noticed a familiar flash of gold earrings, and on closer inspection she grinned at the sight of Aaya, dressed entirely too convincingly in a St. Lulim uniform. He was watching her carefully, and when she met his gaze, he gave her a wink and a thumbs-up.

Part of Hazuki wanted to chase him down again to ask some of the endless questions she'd had since the whole business with the dragons had ended. Who was he, anyway? Where did he fit in with the whole Maker-Healer-Guardian trinity of the supernatural? Was he the one who had pulled them into the library at the moment Tamao had grabbed her hand and completed their circle? Was his the voice that she had heard on the wind that first night of Summer School? For that matter, was the wind that had sparked their *Souma* and forced them to tell Tamao the truth about themselves his doing?

In the end, though, none of those things mattered. She had been slowly learning to let go of the deep regrets she still felt when she thought about losing Hatsumi a lifetime ago, because that pain and emptiness had eventually led to this incredible life with these two remarkable women. Similarly, it didn't really matter whether or not still another hand, divine or otherwise, had played a part in bringing about these events. Hazuki had gained much since that terrible fall from the Universal Garden: in a very real sense, she even had Hatsumi back again, this time without the heartache and guilt. Why go on questioning her good fortune?

So instead, she simply gave Aaya a bow from a distance and continued on her way. He returned the gesture, then disappeared into the crowd.

As she walked along, she passed Yaya and Tsubomi, both of whom flashed her the *Kachou Kamen* hand-signal that had somehow caught on over the past semester. She grinned and returned the gesture. "See you both in a few weeks."

She spotted Amane and Hikari speaking to an older pair that she guessed to be the equestrienne's parents. Part of her wondered whether this separation would be the end for them, since Amane would soon be entering training with the Japanese national team in preparation for the next Olympics while Hikari still had two years of schooling to complete. She still did not know them well enough to make an educated guess, but she had hope for them all the same. Perhaps it would take a miracle to keep them together, but both of them now knew that some miracles could be real after all.

Even as she looked away from the handsome pair, however, she found her eyes drawn to Kaname and Momomi engaged in conversation. Momomi's eyes were filled with tears as she leaned in to embrace her long-time girlfriend, and then she slowly stepped away, their joined hands lingering for a moment before she turned her back and walked toward a crowd of relatives. Kaname sighed visibly, then walked away as well. Hazuki followed, feeling pretty sure that she knew what had just transpired.

She caught up with her former council president not far from the soccer field where the two of them had shared some truly legendary sparring sessions. "How did it go?" she asked.

Kaname sighed, then gave Hazuki a half-smile. "I didn't break up with her."

"Wait, wait, wait," Hazuki said with a laugh. "What happened to all that talk about I've Been Using Her and We're Different People Now? Are you telling me all of that was for nothing?"

"Not at all," Kaname went on, the rest of the wry grin appearing. "I didn't break up with her because she broke up with me *first* ."

"Oh," said Hazuki. "I'm sorry. Except, do I get to say I'm sorry if you were going to end it anyway?"

Kaname looked out across the field. "Her parents are marrying her off to a family that's even richer than hers. She told me she'd never

forget what we had, and that I'd always be special to her, but it was time to move on with our lives. She says she even likes the match, so more power to her, I guess."

"Well, then I'm *still* sorry," Hazuki smiled. "Even though the end result is the same, I imagine no one wants to be the one to get dumped."

"At the same time, it's quite a relief," Kaname mused. "There *was* love there. It's a shame that so many other things kept crowding it out."

Hazuki gave a brisk sigh. "Well, I think it's safe to say that things aren't going to be the same here without you."

"I'm going to miss our spars," Kaname admitted. "I may even miss working with Kojima-sensei again, but don't you dare tell her I said so."

"I won't. And I think what you're really going to miss are the crowds we started drawing there at the end."

"Yeah, well, it's about time someone else got an Ohtori-level audience."

After a pause, Kaname gave her formal rival a sideways look. "Why aren't you with the others, anyway?"

"Chikaru's taking care of her girls, and Tamao's got Etoile duties yet. I'll see them again soon."

"You know, I never did figure that out. Why didn't you run for Etoile with Tamao? You'd have won easily, and split-school Etoile are allowed, even if they're rare."

Hazuki smiled. "I was told I'd have to give up teaching *Kachou Kamen*," she said simply. "In the end, I guess I wanted that more. And anyway, Nagisa and Tamao should do a fine job together, even if it's a year later than they originally intended."

"True. And I guess you won't have to worry much anymore about the two of them cheating with one another, right?"

Choosing to ignore this, Hazuki changed the subject. "You've never told me what you're going to do next. Where will you go from here? University?"

Kaname snorted. "No, my parents are still trying to find a match for me."

"You're kidding."

"I wish. But it doesn't matter in the end, because before long they're going to get *their* wish: they won't have to worry about me *ever* again."

There was something downright ominous in those words, and Hazuki gave the other girl a genuinely worried look. "What are you saying, Kaname?"

"She's saying that she's got other plans," came another familiar voice.

Hazuki turned to see Lilith approaching them, with Ken-chan perched on her shoulder. After giving Hazuki a hug and a kiss on the cheek, she slipped one arm around Kaname's waist and leaned in to kiss her in a much more familiar fashion.

"And what exactly do the two of you have in mind?" Hazuki asked, though she had a pretty good idea of it already.

"Lilith's going to show me some of your old stomping grounds," Kaname smiled. "Plus some of her favorite vacation books, as long as we're at it."

"I guess you decided not to do the born-into-new-worlds thing anymore?" Hazuki asked the Keeper.

"Please," Lilith snorted. "Having to go through puberty again and again? Maybe Eve could enjoy it from a circle of life point of view, but not me." She smiled up at Kaname. "A different kind of journey, though, without the fate of everything at stake? That I can go for."

"And who knows? Maybe I'll find a world that needs me more than this one does," Kaname continued, the look on her face something Hazuki had simply never seen before. "Maybe there's still a place for a wandering samurai with a dark and mysterious past. Maybe I'll even run into your friend Chou'un and show her some of the moves you're teaching in her name."

"Give her my best if you do," Hazuki laughed. "Just don't ever try to steal her menma."

Kaname looked out at the soccer field again, then turned to Hazuki and gave her a very odd smile. "So… I'll see you around, I guess."

"I'll be pissed if you don't show up for tea," Hazuki nodded.

The two samurai then embraced one more time, for the road if nothing else. Lilith, of course, could not let the opportunity pass. "Mmm, where's a camera when I need one?"

"You'll send word if you need me," Hazuki said, as a statement rather than a question.

"I will. Tell Chikaru and Tamao thanks for everything."

"Is there anything you want me to pass on to Eve?" Lilith asked.

Hazuki thought about this for a moment, then smiled softly. "She already knows. But tell her I'm looking forward to the next tea party."

The sun was already low in the sky by the time Chikaru, Tamao, Hazuki, Nagisa and Shizuma gathered one last time at Naoko's tree. Even though she knew she'd be back at some point, to visit if

nothing else, this was the last place Chikaru wanted to see before truly leaving Astraea Hill as a student. Not the eerily bare walls of her empty dorm room where she'd spent so many happy nights with her loved ones, not the second-home familiarity of the club rooms at St. Lulim: she wanted her last memory as a student to be of this place, where her life had changed forever.

While the others watched from a respectful distance, Chikaru knelt at the tree and placed a bouquet of white lilies on the spot where Naoko had been sitting that night. She then closed her eyes and offered a silent prayer of thanks.

She then returned to the arms of her dear ones, and they began the slow walk back toward Strawberry Hall, where Shizuma had arranged for a limousine to take them for a festive night out before the necessity of another brief post-term separation.

"I hope you'll get a chance to come see the house soon," Shizuma smiled at Chikaru. "I have to say, I'm very much looking forward to having a roommate again."

"Is it okay if I'm a little jealous?" Nagisa sighed. "Still one more year before I can leave this place and come be with you."

"All the more reason to study hard," Shizuma nodded sagely. "Not that I'd in any way pressure you to choose one *specific* university over another, but it *is* an awfully nice house we'll be staying in. Plenty of room for, oh, I don't know, at least five post-grads."

"At least five, eh?" Tamao grinned knowingly.

"Well, probably more than that, but five seems a fine number. Then some of the other rooms could go to… other uses. Perhaps an art studio, or a music room, or a library. Not to mention the enclosed patio that could easily serve as a place to, say, practice martial arts?"

"But not that you'd pressure us to choose one *specific* university," Hazuki snickered.

"Not at all," Shizuma smiled widely. "But it would be a shame to waste all that space, wouldn't it?"

"Ah, Shizuma," Chikaru grinned. "I'd kiss you, but… well, I've seen the way your fiancee handles a naginata."

"Oh, that reminds me!" Tamao said brightly. "Wasn't there a certain wager between the two of you? Something about graduating an Astraea school without being kissed?"

Chikaru pulled up short, having completely forgotten about that. "Huh. I guess I did, at that," she said with a sardonic smile.

"Hmm, we never discussed what exactly we were wagering, did we?" Shizuma frowned, turning to face her future housemate.

"No, I suppose we didn't. But bragging rights over a Hanazono have to count for something."

"Well, yes, if *that's* something you want to brag about," Shizuma snorted.

"Chikaru," Tamao said then, laying one hand over hers.

Chikaru looked into Tamao's eyes, and felt her breath catch in her throat. There came a movement of energy that started in their joined hands and fired behind those matchless violet eyes. Tamao leaned closer, filling Chikaru's vision with those pools of darkness and color, and then, with a warm surge of their joined *Souma*, Tamao kissed her softly and deeply. At first Chikaru was too surprised to do much but allow herself to be kissed, but something very real stirred inside her at this touch, and she felt herself melting against this wonderful girl, the familiar feel of her energy now joined by sensations that were equal parts physical and emotional. It was a kiss of love in all its purity.

Meanwhile, strong arms were slipping around her from behind, and she felt the familiar curves of Hazuki's body pressing against her.

This was no warm bedtime cuddle, however, and when she broke from Tamao and looked over her shoulder, Hazuki leaned in and kissed her as well. This time the joining of energy was lightning and fire, and the love, while very much present, carried with it an undeniable subtext of raw hunger. Tamao lay her head against Chikaru's shoulder as they enfolded her in the warmest of embraces, and along with their shared *Souma*, Chikaru could all but hear their words echoing through her.

Let us love you.

Let us embrace you.

Let us desire you.

Let us show you what you mean to us.

Let us share ourselves with you.

Let us pleasure you.

Let us make you happy.

Let us make you--

"Come on, Nagisa," Shizuma said from a million miles away. "Let's give them some space. They'll catch up… eventually."

After a long while, they broke, and Chikaru looked from one of them to the other, feeling the mix of love, desire and anxiety in their expressions as they waited for her reaction to what she knew had to have been a choreographed moment. How long had they been planning this, anyway?

"Chikaru?" Hazuki whispered.

Chikaru smiled. "Okay," she nodded, somewhat breathlessly. "I… think I *might* be able to get used to that…"

The End

"Hand Me Downs" by Rain Fletcher (Suzume CA)

12 October 2009 - 3 January 2010

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

First and foremost, thank you one and all for reading what has been, for me, an engrossing, exciting and occasionally deeply therapeutic story. I haven't written this much this quickly in ages, and it's been one of the most rewarding creative experiences I've had in some time. And now, if you'll indulge me, I'd like to take a few lines for notes.

Soundtrack:

As odd as it may seem to give a story based on two anime a soundtrack of modern American folk music, this story was very much written to the music of Indigo Girls. It's been a pleasure to re-acquaint myself with both their incredible harmonies and their insightful lyrics. Some struggles are universal, and there are messages in their music that reach across lines of gender, lifestyle and nation. Who better to help me imagine this story about these women struggling to find love and truth in their tumultuous lives?

The following songs were used for chapter-opening lyrics:

From STRANGE FIRE (1989) : Strange Fire

From INDIGO GIRLS (1989) : Closer to Fine, Secure Yourself, Prince of Darkness, Love's Recovery

From NOMADS INDIANS SAINTS (1990) : World Falls, 1 2 3, Hand Me Downs, You and Me of the 10,000 Wars

From RITES OF PASSAGE (1992) : Love Will Come to You, Chickenman

From SWAMP OPHELIA (1994) : Least Complicated

From COME ON NOW SOCIAL (1999) : Faye Tucker

From ALL THAT WE LET IN (2004) : Fill it Up Again, All That We Let In, Tether

Additionally, some of these songs have specific scenes attached to them, so please indulge me as I match the music with the scene I attempted to write:

"Chickenman" - Chapter 5, Hazuki pursues Aaya -- also Chapter 20, Hazuki and Kaname on the road

"Love Will Come to You" - Chapter 11, Chikaru and Tamao's theme

"Tether" - Chapter 15, the first meeting of Kachou Kamen

"Faye Tucker" - Chapter 17, the duel

"Love's Recovery" - Chapter 23, the trinity

"Hand Me Downs," the song used for the title of the overarching story, was chosen first for a Hazuki who was seeking wholeness in this hand-me-down life, but somewhere along the line it became very meaningful for the relationship between Hazuki and Kaname (yadda yadda, more alike than different, blah blah), so sometimes soundtrack details dovetail without the author even expecting it.

The Yamibou arc (which I mentally dubbed the "Far Cry" section) was written to SNAKES AND ARROWS (2007) by Rush, with lyrics used from the songs "Far Cry," "We Hold On" and "Workin' Them Angels"

Other lyrics shamelessly used as chapter intros included "She Said She Said" by the Beatles, from REVOLVER, and "Grey Seal" by

Elton John, from GOODBYE YELLOW BRICK ROAD

Legalese:

While I am certainly never going to make a dime off this story, please do not redistribute it without my permission.

It would appear I managed to get away with only one original character in the person of Kojima-sensei. (I'm not going to count the Devourer.) All other characters belong to their respective copyright holders.

These particular versions of Chou'un Shiryuu and Ryofu Housen were from *Koihime Musou* and its sequel *Shin Koihime Musou*, a pair of bawdy retellings of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* with an almost exclusively female cast. Certainly not intellectually taxing, but Chou'un is one of the best deadpan snarkers of all time. *Kachou Kamen!*

Azuma Hazuki, Azuma Hatsumi (Eve), Lilith, Ken-chan, Aaya, Seiren, Kogechibi, Youko, Milka, Fujihime, Gargantua (seriously, that was his name), Ritsuko, Yamiyama and the Siberian Tiger were from *Yami to Boushi to Hon no Tabibito* . May it one day be licensed for a Western audience.

All other characters were, of course, from *Strawberry Panic* . But you wouldn't be here if you didn't know that.

Thanks:

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Thanks to Hashkorns and KoSSa and everyone else who cared enough about these girls to wave a shipping banner. I hope "Tamazukaru" did not disappoint in the end.

Thanks to DarkShinji8003 for keeping tabs. I hope you enjoyed the ride.

And thanks to everyone who read and did not review, of course! I know the hit counter is not the most accurate gauge of readership, but it's still kind of cool to be closing in on 5000 combined hits here at the end of HMD. You all make me a very happy writer.

Now, before I go…

Shizuma shifted under the sweat-drenched sheets, propping herself up on her elbows and looking down at Nagisa, who like her was glistening with perspiration yet again. She knew she'd never get tired of that look of post-coital bliss on her darling's face.

Nonetheless…

"Should we ask them?" she said in a happily exhausted voice.

"Maybe we should," Nagisa admitted. She then made a half-hearted effort to get up before flomping back onto the mattress.

"Shall I, then?" Shizuma smirked.

"Would you mind? I honestly don't know if my legs work anymore."

With a smile, Shizuma leaned in to kiss this woman she had fallen so deeply in love with. "Don't fall asleep before I get back," she growled playfully, "or I will *punish* you."

"Mmm, don't tempt me," Nagisa giggled.

Shizuma rose unsteadily from the bed, slipped on a light robe, and padded out of their bedroom and down the hall. After a couple of turns to enter the opposite wing, she staggered to the door of Chikaru's Room, as they all still called it.

Sure enough, there was a warm green light shining out into the hall from the crack under the door.

She knocked twice. "Excuse me," she called. "Not to interrupt anything, but as much as we both love you… would you mind keeping it down for the rest of the night?"

The light immediately faded, and there were a few giggles from behind the closed door. "Sorry!" three voices called in rough unison.

"Thank you," Shizuma chuckled as she shuffled back down the hall. "See you in the morning."